

MYKE COLE



LEGION VERSUS PHALANX

THE EPIC STRUGGLE FOR INFANTRY
SUPREMACY IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

CHRONOS

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LEGION VERSUS PHALANX

The Epic Struggle for Infantry Supremacy in the Ancient World



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OSPREY

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MYKE COLE

OSPREY
PUBLISHING

I thought it necessary to discuss this subject at some length,
because at the time many Greeks supposed when the
Macedonians were beaten that it was incredible; and many will
afterwards be at a loss to account for the inferiority of the
phalanx to the Roman system of arming.

POLYBIUS, *HISTORIES*

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PREFACE

I don't come to history via traditional academic paths. I'm a dyed-in-the-wool science-fiction and fantasy nerd, and my formative years playing Dungeons & Dragons and Warhammer first introduced me to armored warriors, which eventually led my parents (because back then they thought D&D turned you into a Satanist) to steer me toward military history.

If there's one thing you can say for nerds, it's that we're tribal. I'm a "big tent" nerd, in that I want the largest tribe possible, so that every time I say, "Man! That's awesome!" there is someone on hand to nod and say "I know!"

And that is why if I prize one thing above all others in historical writing, it's accessibility. A lot of great work is meticulously researched, brilliantly deductive, and utterly impenetrable to anyone other than the most dedicated scholar. History, and in particular military history, is exciting stuff, often with dramatic and narrative tension that puts the best of the *Star Wars* movies to shame, and that's saying something. But pop culture continues to win out in the public imagination because historians too often prize scholarly rigor over telling a good story. I don't think these goals are mutually exclusive. It is possible to have a solid work of scholarship, well-grounded in the known sources, that is also exciting, dramatic and gripping, as the real events often were.

I combine this non-academic perspective with the warrior's lens. I have spent nearly my entire professional life in one armed service or another, and have plenty of time on the ground in major conflicts, in both military and law enforcement capacities. There is a universal quality to the warfighter experience, an emotional perspective that has to be felt to be truly understood. I can try to convey it with words. This is inadequate to the *feel* of it, the adrenaline, the fear, the despair, the overwhelming pride, but it does give me an insight into what fighting men experienced that I can turn out on the page. We can confirm the universality of this experience in a wide variety of sources, both literary and material. There are common characteristics of *esprit de corps*, of qualities of leadership, of the kind of mental acuity that is born of the need to make instant life-or-death decisions, that are absolutely no different now than they were 2,200 years ago. As I walk you through these battles, I hope I will convey at least some of that experience to you if you've never served, or at least make you nod in recognition if you have.

While I believe that my military experience gives me a different perspective on military history, I want to be clear that I don't consider it a requirement. I dislike the rivalry between historians with prior military service and those without. Both

have valuable insights to share on the subject, and neither has an advantage over the other. While I want to share *my* perspective on the topic, I also want the biggest tent possible, with room for everyone who wants to be in it.

Although my primary goal is to expand my nerd tribe, my secondary one should appeal to scholars and academics: a public in love with history is more amenable to funding the humanities, granting access to private collections and sites for research and encouraging the best and brightest of our younger generation to enter the field.

So, you'll notice that this book is targeting the uninitiated. If I did my job right, a person who knows nothing about ancient history should be able to pick it up and first and foremost *enjoy* it, with the second order effect of maybe learning something. I hope that any scholars in my audience will be patient with this.

To this end, I will mostly use the Latin or Greek words once, but sometimes a rough English equivalent, depending on the context. I understand that in many cases (particularly with military ranks and units), there isn't a one-to-one translation, but I'd far rather have readers who can't read classical languages have a mostly accurate idea of what I'm talking about, than have them struggle with the Latin or Greek and give up entirely.

I try to define every non-English word as soon as I use it, but in some cases, I think the meaning is easily understood through context and I know a full description is coming soon, so I decide to wait until we get to that point. For those who have neither Latin nor Greek, please be patient. I won't forget you, and a definition/description is coming. I've included a glossary at the back of the book. Use it early and often.

When I quote dialogue from the ancient sources, I will always do my best to translate and paraphrase it into conversational English. Again, my goal is that the average reader should get the gist of what people are saying, rather than being exactly accurate. If you see quoted text in italics, that means I'm quoting directly from the source. If you see quoted text not in italics, that means I'm paraphrasing.

This book covers a period from roughly the early 3rd century BC through the mid 2nd century BC. I do not use the terms BCE and CE. I get that people want to shed the religious connotations, but the fact is that BC and AD are in common use now, so much so that they don't have religious connotations for me, and it seems silly to just change letters but otherwise leave the whole system unaltered. It is not my intention to offend, only make my life easier as a writer, and if this does rankle with you, I hope you will accept my apology.

You'll probably notice that a huge portion of this book is devoted to talking about everything *but* the legion and the phalanx, such as the politics, social details of the period, the character of commanders, terrain, weather, and other factors. I have two reasons for this. First, I am trying to tell a story here, and the key to good narrative is drama, which I unabashedly seek to emphasize. Second, the legion and the phalanx, like any military formation, did not operate in a

vacuum. Military tactics are part and parcel of their society, and every aspect of that society, from the character of its generals to its religious observations to its diet, poetry and song, has a bearing on how those tactics were employed and work against one another. In many cases, it is critical to understand how the personalities of the generals commanding legions and phalanxes impacted their use of them. Napoleon's quote about Alexander the Great bears repeating here: *"The personality of the general is indispensable, he is the head, he is the all of an army ... It was not the Macedonian Phalanx which penetrated to India, but Alexander."*

I've said before that a novel is a group effort for which one person gets the credit. The same is true of a history book. This fits nicely with what I learned in the military – that no person ever does anything, even something as self-reliant as writing a book, alone. Though an individual hero may shine, their radiance blinds the viewer to the legions of comrades-in-arms all around them, who laid down the covering fire needed for the moment of glory. In this way, writing a book is a distinctly military experience. My name goes on the cover, and you don't see the agents, editors, art directors, designers, production staff, sales people, friends and colleagues that make the engine turn. I'd like to remedy that here by saying that this book may have been written by me, but it was created by a small army.

I do want to specifically call out some individuals here. First and foremost, Professor Michael Livingston of the Citadel, the military college of South Carolina, who took me under his wing and mentored me despite an intensely demanding schedule. Also thanks to fellow Osprey author and Loyola Professor Kelly DeVries, who contributed feedback, Latin translation and general advice. Both of these gentlemen took days of their precious time and spent precious money accompanying me on my battlefield surveys in Greece, and this book, and my entire approach to history in general, would be infinitely poorer without their help. Thanks also to Dr Dan Diffendale, a classical archaeologist *par excellence* who wasn't put off by a rank amateur reaching out to him out of nowhere. Thanks also to Professor Greg Aldrete of the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay, who didn't mind me fanboying over his experimental archaeology, and whose early support of my goal to make this accessible above all, helped give me the confidence to stay on track. Thanks also to Aris Karachalios, the Mayor of Farsala, and his Chief Archaeologist, Vasso Noula, who welcomed Mike, Kelly and me to the site of Cynoscephalae and devoted time and resources to assisting with my research. Academics sometimes get a reputation for standoffishness and provinciality, but I don't think it's deserved, and the warm welcome all the aforementioned folks gave to a stranger prove it. Thanks are also due to fantasy author, rocket scientist and historian Alan Smale, fantasy author Daniel Polansky, and technology CEO Melani Flanagan, all of whom read early versions of the manuscript and gave invaluable advice.

Critics of military history will often say that the study of armed conflict and professional violence glorifies the act. This is an assertion roundly deflected by any number of writers, but I also want to address it here.

I fought three times in Iraq. I absolutely abhor war. The thirst for understanding, to truly know the warrior experience of the past, has more to do with love of humanity than of war itself. I am also driven by a desire to connect with my legacy. Every profession has its roots, and warriors are no different. For better or for worse, this is my story as much as it is anyone's, and I will tell it to the best of my ability.

I had to learn a warrior's ways down in war's sucking mud. It is my greatest hope that everyone else should study it on peace's dry land. I dream of the day that war is a subject only for scholarly study and not for practical application. To the extent that this book might be a step in that direction, I am humbly grateful.

Myke Cole
Brooklyn, NY 2017



CHRONOLOGY

575 BC	Servius Tullius, author of the Servian reforms, becomes King of Rome.
480 BC	First Battle of Thermopylae.
431–404 BC	Peloponnesian War.
418 BC	Birth of Iphicrates. First Battle of Mantinea.
340–338 BC	Latin War.
396 BC	Rome conquers the Etruscan city of Veii.
390 BC	The Senones under Brennus defeat the Roman army at the Battle of the Allia and go on to sack Rome. Iphicrates uses his innovations in infantry equipment and tactics to defeat the Spartans near Corinth.
July, 371 BC	Battle of Leuctra.
362 BC	Epaminondas killed at the Second Battle of Mantinea.
353 BC	Death of Iphicrates.
343–341 BC	First Samnite War.
343 BC	Romans defeat the Samnites at the Battle of Mount Gaurus.
338 BC	Battle of Chaeronea secures Macedonian hegemony over Greece.
326–304 BC	Second Samnite War.
331 BC	Battle of Gaugamela cements Macedonian hegemony over Asia.
328 BC	Last of the Persian forces subdued.
326 BC	Alexander the Great turns back from India, marking the furthest extent of his empire.
June, 323 BC	Death of Alexander the Great, the beginning of the “Hellenistic period.”
322–321 BC	First <i>Diadochi</i> (Successor) War.
319–315 BC	Second Successor War.
319 BC	Pyrrhus of Epirus born.

317 BC	Pyrrhus' father Aeacides is dethroned as king of Epirus.
314–311 BC	Third Successor War.
308–301 BC	Fourth Successor War.
306 BC	Pyrrhus restored to his father's throne by Glaukias, King of the Taulantian tribe of Illyrians.
302 BC	Pyrrhus is ousted from the Epirote throne by Cassander, one of the Successors.
298 BC	Pyrrhus taken as a hostage to Alexandria, where he marries Antigone, stepdaughter of the Successor king Ptolemy I.
298–291 BC	Manius Curius Dentatus serves as tribune of the plebs.
298–290 BC	Third Samnite War.
297 BC	With Ptolemy's backing, Pyrrhus is restored to the throne of Epirus. He rules jointly with Neoptolemus II briefly, before having him assassinated.
292 BC	Pyrrhus goes to war against his brother-in-law and ally, the Antigonid Demetrius Poliorcetes (the Besieger).
290 BC	Manius Curius Dentatus elected consul.
288 BC	Pyrrhus jointly rules Macedon with the Successor king Lysimachus.
284 BC	Lysimachus drives Pyrrhus out of Macedon.
282 BC	Romans install garrisons in the Greco-Italian cities of Thurii, Locri and Rhegium. Tarentines respond by attacking Romans in Thurii. Terrified of Roman reprisal, they appeal to Pyrrhus for help.
280 BC	Publius Calerius Laevinius elected consul. Pyrrhus lands in Italy. Battle of Heraclea.
279 BC	Publius Decius Mus elected consul. Pyrrhus invades Apulia. Battle of Asculum.
278 BC	Pyrrhus receives two offers: first, from the Greek cities in Sicily asking for his help driving out Carthage. Second, from

the Macedonians, whose king Ptolemy Keraunos (Thunderbolt) had been killed fighting the Gauls. Pyrrhus decides that Sicily is the better opportunity. Pyrrhus lands in Sicily, lifts the Carthaginian siege of Syracuse, and is proclaimed king.

277 BC

Pyrrhus captures Eryx.

276 BC

Pyrrhus lays siege to Lilybaeum.

Realizing that he can't take it without a navy, he taxes and raises levies from the Syracusans to create the needed force.

This makes him deeply unpopular with his own allies and subjects. Pyrrhus departs Sicily and returns to Italy.

275 BC

Pyrrhus defeated at the Battle of Beneventum, decides to depart Italy.

274 BC

Pyrrhus defeats Antigonos II Gonatus at the Battle of the Aous and seizes the throne of Macedon again.

272 BC

Pyrrhus lays siege to Sparta at the behest of Cleonymus, but fails. Pyrrhus now intervenes in Argos and is killed there.

270 BC

Death of Manius Curius Dentatus.

264–241 BC

First Punic War.

241 BC

Birth of Antiochus III the Great.

238 BC

Philip V of Macedon born.

229 BC

Birth of Titus Quinctius Flamininus and Lucius Aemilius Paullus Macedonicus.

223 BC

Seleucus III Keraunos (Thunderbolt), king of the Seleucids, is assassinated while on campaign.

222 BC

Antiochus III assumes the Seleucid throne.

221 BC

Philip V becomes King of Macedon.

220–217 BC

Social War.

217 BC

Antiochus III defeated by Ptolemy IV at the Battle of Raphia.

218–201 BC

Second Punic War.

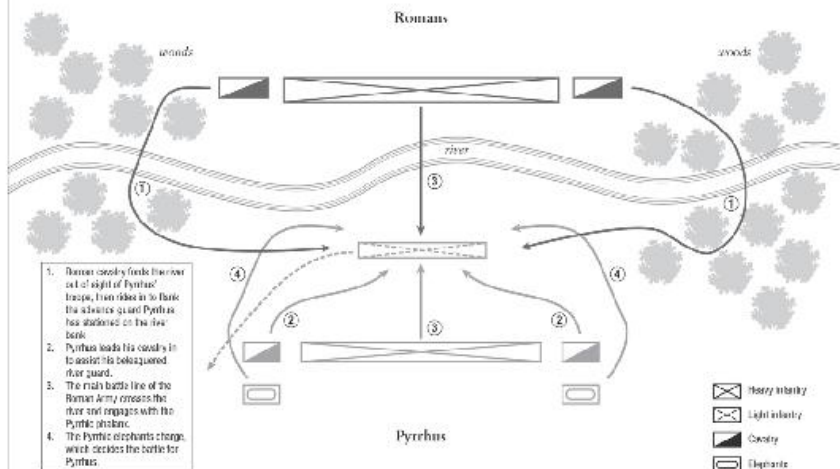
August, 216 BC

Disastrous Roman defeat at the Battle of Cannae. Lucius Aemilius Paullus, the father of Lucius Aemilius Paullus Macedonicus, is killed.

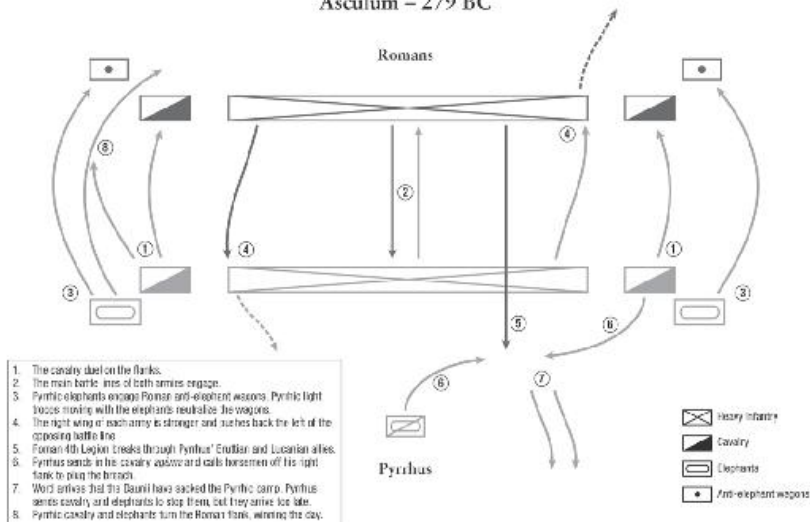
215 BC	Philip V of Macedon makes a treaty of alliance with Hannibal Barca.
214–205 BC	First Macedonian War.
212 BC	Birth of Perseus of Macedon.
211 BC	Velites introduced into the Roman legion as a class of skirmisher.
205 BC	Treaty of Phoenice ends the First Macedonian War. Flamininus becomes proprætor of Tarentum.
202 BC	Scipio Africanus victorious at the Battle of Zama. Carthage is effectively defeated, though the Second Punic War does not technically end until the following year.
203 BC	Antiochus III and Philip V sign an alliance with the goal of conquering the lands of Ptolemy V.
200–197 BC	Second Macedonian War.
199 BC	Flamininus appointed quaestor.
198 BC	Flamininus elected consul. Defeats Philip V at the Battle of the Aous.
197 BC	Rome defeats Philip V at the Battle of Cynoscephalæ.
193 BC	Lucius Aemilius Paullus Macedonicus elected curule ædile.
192–188 BC	Syrian War.
191 BC	Romans defeat Antiochus III at the Fifth Battle of Thermopylæ. Lucius Aemilius Paullus Macedonicus elected prætor.
190 BC	Hannibal Barca leads the Seleucid fleet to defeat against Rome's ally Rhodes at the naval Battle of the Eurymedon. A combined Roman–Rhodian fleet again defeats the Seleucids at sea at the Battle of Myonessus. Finally, Antiochus III's land army is defeated at the Battle of Magnesia.
187 BC	Antiochus III dies while pillaging a Persian temple.
182 BC	Lucius Aemilius Paullus Macedonicus elected consul.
188 BC	Treaty of Apamea ends the Syrian War.
179 BC	Death of Philip V of Macedon. Perseus ascends to the throne.

178 BC	Perseus marries Laodice V, daughter of Seleucus IV.
171 BC	Third Macedonian War. Antigonids defeat Romans at the Battle of Callinicus.
174 BC	Death of Flaminius.
168 BC	Lucius Aemilius Paullus Macedonicus elected consul again. Antigonid defeat by Rome at the Battle of Pydna.
160 BC	Death of Lucius Aemilius Paullus Macedonicus.
107 BC	Reforms of Gaius Marius eliminate class distinctions in the Roman legion. While this is as much a social effort as a military one, it ends the old manipular system and replaces it with a cohort system that centers around a single type of heavy infantry legionary.

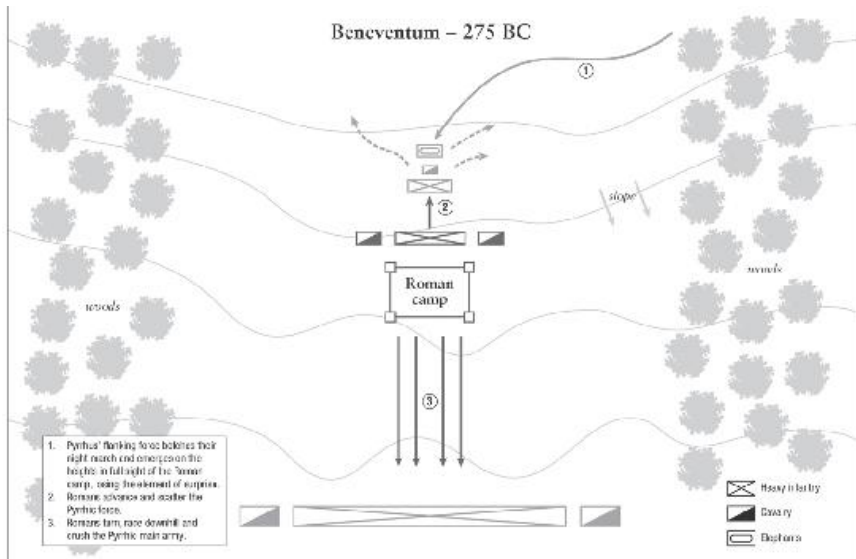
Heraclea – 280 BC



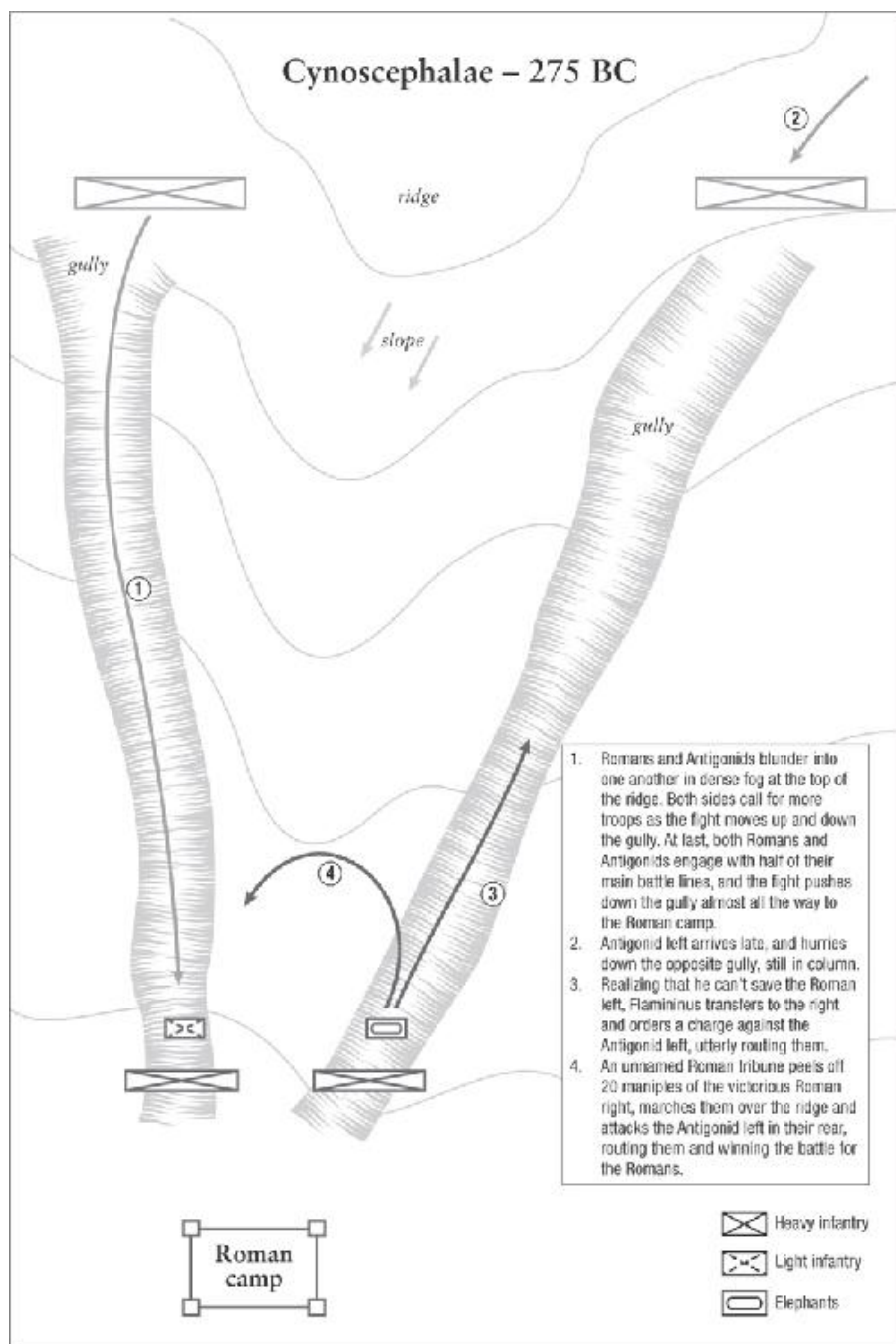
Asculum – 279 BC



Beneventum – 275 BC

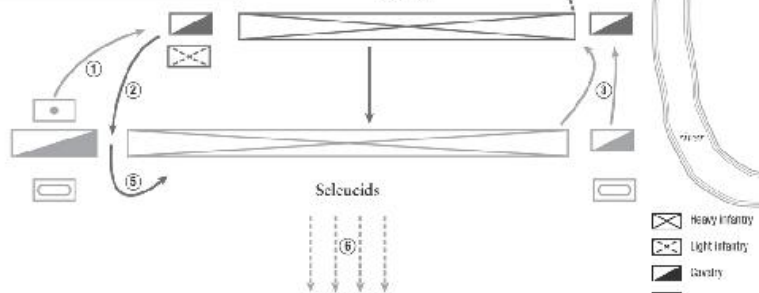


Cynoscephalae – 275 BC

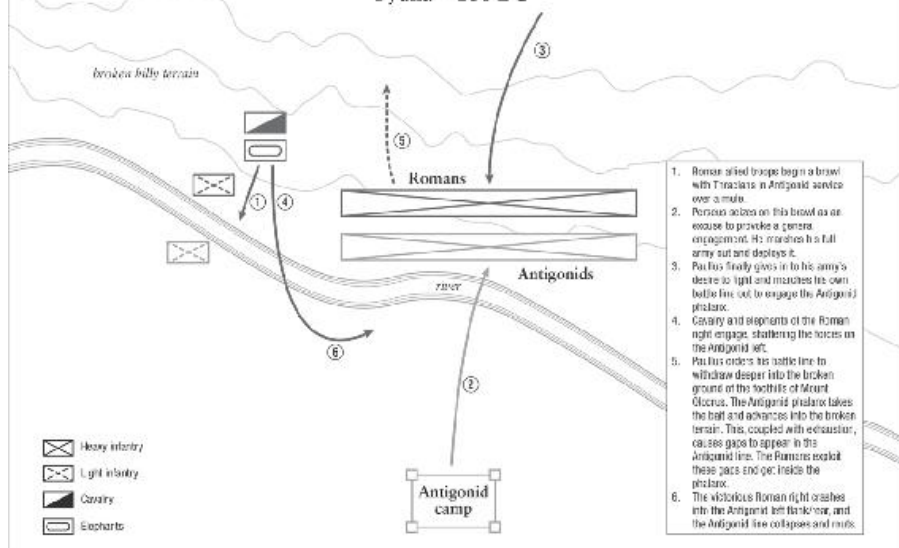


Magnesia – 190 BC

1. Seleucid asymmetrical charge, are routed by Roman light infantry, and race back into the Seleucid left, causing chaos.
2. Eumenes charges in with the Roman and allied cavalry.
3. Antiochus III leads his companion cavalry and elephants against the Roman left, routing it.
4. The fleeing Romans are rallied outside the Roman camp, and sent back into the fight, driving Antiochus off.
5. The Roman and allied cavalry succeed in utterly routing the Seleucid cavalry.
6. With both wings of cavalry routed, the Seleucid infantry form a square and desperately try to retreat to their camp. The Romans ridicule them with missiles until eventually the remaining elephants in the center of the square stampede, breaking the rest of the Seleucid resistance.



Pydna – 168 BC





PART I

AND IN THIS CORNER ... EXAMINING THE LEGION AND THE PHALANX



POLYBIUS, *HISTORIES*:

It should prove a useful exercise, and one well worth the trouble, to study the differences between them [the legion and the phalanx], and to discover the reason why on the battlefield the Romans always proved the victors and carried off the prize.



I

WHO WOULD WIN IN A FIGHT? THE EAGLE AND THE LION

There, as soon as the ranks were disordered and the use of the long spears, the Macedonians call them “sarissae,” was prevented because their comrades were rushing among them, the Roman legions advanced and hurled their spears into the disordered enemy.

Livy, History of Rome

Ask the most casual student of history about the Hellenistic phalanx. Actually, strike that. Most don't know about the concept of Hellenism, the “Greekification” that dominated the western tradition of arms for much of ancient history. Instead, ask them about the “Greek” phalanx. You'll probably get a blank look. So, change tactics. “You know, the Spartans?” Now, recognition dawns. “Oh, the Spartans! Those guys in 300.”

Oddly enough, I see this as a good thing. Frank Miller's groundbreaking comic, made into the even more wildly popular film, is largely faithful to the 5th century Greek historian Herodotus' account of the stand of the 300 Spartan hoplites (from the Greek *hoplitēs*, meaning a “heavy-armed foot-soldier”) at Thermopylae in 480 BC. It at least paints the mental picture needed to understand what a phalanx is: a bunch of guys standing shoulder to shoulder, bronze-faced shields overlapping, wearing bronze helmets, cuirasses (body armor) and greaves (combo shin/knee-guards), leveling iron-tipped spears at the enemy.

Now, ask the same person about the Roman legion. Countless films, novels and comic books have cemented this image in the popular imagination: a man in a *lorica segmentata*, an articulated, banded steel body armor that covered chest, back and shoulders, a centurion with a vine rod, a red transverse crest on his Imperial Gallic Type I helmet. Big, rectangular red shields. Trumpeters with wolfskins on their helmets. They saw soldiers like this in the opening scenes of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* or in the harrowing scourging of Jesus in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*.

Most people know that the Bronze Age came before the Iron Age. They see a

lot of bronze in the phalanx, and more iron in the legion, and so most people seem to know that the phalanx is the “older” way of fighting, and the legion the “newer.” Again, this is good, because it shows how entrenched these formations are in the popular imagination.

There’s a reason for this. For most of history, up until the Battle of Beneventum in 275 BC, the phalanx dominated the battlefield. The legion slowly chipped away at this dominance, until they at last took the reins and held them for nearly the next 600 years, until the Battle of Adrianople in AD 378. This is a controversial statement. Most scholars will not agree with me that medieval warfare begins at Adrianople, but this battle decisively showed the ascendancy of cavalry, as the Gothic lancers smashed into the legionary lines, utterly routing them and ushering in, in military terms at least, the Middle Ages.

Despite this the legacy of the phalanx is still visible. The “phalanx” is still around today, a synonym for unbreakable strength. It has lent its name to an anti-missile defense system used by the US Navy. I still remember Phalanxes popping up to shoot down incoming 107mm rockets while I took cover in the Baghdad mud in the winter of 2009. That this defensive anti-missile system is named for the phalanx is no accident. With its limited mobility, impenetrable wall of shields and bristling hedge of spear-points, the ancient phalanx was one of the greatest defensive formations of all time.

The legion is every bit as enduring. France still has a “legion,” the famous *Légion Étrangère*, a unit that allows foreign nationals to fight in the French military. Many veterans of the United States military join the American Legion, a federally chartered corporation that represents the interests of veterans of expeditionary wars.

That the names have endured is a testament to how significant a role these formations played on the ancient battlefield. The phalanx was responsible for the fall of the Persian Empire, the largest in the world at the time, spanning from the Balkans to the Indus valley at its height. We would likely call Alexander the Great just plain old Alexander if not for the miracles the phalanx performed for him, again and again, against overwhelming odds.

The legion set the standard for military organization, laying the groundwork for the professionalization of armies that enabled imperial Rome to reach heights that even the Persians would never have dreamed of. So much of the political legacy of the United States is based on the Roman model, from the senate to the architecture of the buildings in the capital. It’s a legacy that was borne on the back of the Roman legionary, whose role in everything from the concept of a retirement system to how Americans run for political office cannot be understated.

The phalanx and the legion represented the military pinnacle of their respective eras. This of course begs the age-old question, asked in bars and in dorm rooms around the world since the dawn of time: “Who would win in a fight?”

History has already told us the answer. The legion would. The more interesting

question is, “Why?”

And here we are afforded a rare opportunity. Wargamers and history fans have posed these questions time and again regarding military formations that never met. How would the ancient Romans fare against Native Americans? Would an English longbowman from Henry V’s army be equal to a Zouave of the 11th New York Regiment at the height of the American Civil War? The enormous success of the Spike TV show *Deadliest Warrior* shows that these fantasies are fun to contemplate, and have definitely captured the popular imagination. But they’re also frustrating, because no matter how accurately we may simulate the fight, the real battle conditions are forever gone and these warriors never truly met. We can never *really* know the answer.

But that’s not the case with the legion and the phalanx. They really *did* meet. They really *did* fight. We really *do* know what happened. There are many examples where the two formations faced off against one another, including six major clashes where primary sources give us a clear understanding of how things played out. The study of ancient history is always tough, mostly because there aren’t a lot of “primary sources”: artifacts or documents created at the time of the historical event we are studying. All those years wear down parchment, stone, even memory. But in the legion and the phalanx, we have that rarest and most wonderful of things: a laboratory where we can input facts, sprinkle with speculation, develop hypotheses and see them play out before our very eyes. We can watch history unfold.

Here’s what we know: both the material and the written record tell us that from the time of ancient Sumeria, the heavy infantry phalanx dominated the battlefield. Not the refined hoplite phalanx of classical Greece, but a bunch of guys armed with spears or pikes, standing shoulder to shoulder with overlapping shields, presenting an impenetrable wall of metal to the enemy. We also know that even before Gaius Marius introduced his famous reforms in 107 BC, the Roman legion had eclipsed the phalanx as the masters of infantry battle.

But was the phalanx really obsolete? Viking shield walls evoked the ancient phalanx long after Rome had fallen. Phalanxes of Swiss pikemen were owning battlefields through the renaissance. “Pike and shot” formations were the backbone of 17th century armies, and pikes were still being manufactured and issued to troops as late as World War II. Clearly this method of fighting had staying power.

So, if the phalanx was so effective, why did it give way to the legion? What happened when the two formations clashed? The question began nagging at me as I played tabletop war games, watching the formations play out against one another represented by cardboard counters or 6mm miniature soldiers. The two manners of fighting seemed so completely different, from the weapons and armor to the organization of the soldiers. They were clear outgrowths of their extremely different cultures and their respective systems of government, so utterly different that they automatically triggered that instinctive nerd curiosity – “Who would win in a fight?” I figured I couldn’t be the first nerd who’d ever wanted to know.

The question had already been asked and answered.

But when I dug into it, I discovered that was only partly true. “Why did the legion win over the phalanx?” definitely isn’t a new question. It was asked by the 2nd century Greek historian Polybius in Book 18 of his famous *Histories*. Like all ambitious historians, Polybius doesn’t just ask the question, he answers it:

In all these situations [varying terrain, sieges, the element of surprise, etc] the Macedonian formation is sometimes of little use, and sometimes of none at all, because the phalanx soldier cannot operate in smaller units or singly, whereas the Roman formation is highly flexible. Every Roman soldier, once he is armed and goes into action, can adapt himself equally well to any place or time and meet an attack from any quarter. He is likewise equally well prepared and needs to make no change whether he has to fight with the main body or with a detachment, in maniples or on his own. Accordingly, since the effective use of the parts of the Roman army is so much superior, their plans are much more likely to achieve success than those of others.

The thrust of Polybius’ argument is this: the more flexible and agile Roman legion out-adapts the phalanx, which can’t deal with the sudden changes and variations that are common in a battle. Polybius adds that the phalanx requires completely unbroken, level ground to operate effectively, and that it doesn’t use a reserve.

So why are Polybius’ thoughts on the subject so important? After all, he’s not the only ancient writer to talk about battles where the legion fought the phalanx. But Polybius was alive during three of the battles we’re going to examine. He was around three years old when the Battle of Cynoscephalae was fought, ten during the Battle of Magnesia, and 32 during the Battle of Pydna. This doesn’t mean that he was a witness to the battles, but it does mean that he lived in the world that was changed by them, was influenced by the stories that grew up around them, and knew intimately the technology and society that shaped them. In fact, Polybius lived in Rome (as a hostage for his father, a leading general of the Achaean League – a confederation of Greek city-states that covered the Peloponnese, the region of southwestern Greece), where he tutored the children of Lucius Aemilius Paullus, the Roman general at Pydna, whom we will discuss in chapter IX. Polybius’ first-hand knowledge of the culture, society and even some of the main players in the battles this book examines makes him an authority.

But was Polybius right? Was the legion’s agility and flexibility the reason for its ultimate success? Was it so much better than the phalanx?

And amazingly, this question hasn’t been addressed directly by modern scholars in any real depth. I found plenty of snatches of discussion on how the legion fought the phalanx, but no single work that dove deep to give it the attention it deserved. Modern scholars haven’t adequately followed Polybius up, checking his work, questioning his supposition, and asking “Why did the legion really win out over the phalanx?”

We’ll do that here. But more importantly, we’re going to scratch the nerd itch. I want to have fun exploring the question, to “geek out” over the details: arms and equipment, organization, tactical deployment and trappings of identity that

made each unit representative of its respective culture. The ancient sources tell us of six important battles, and we'll deep-dive into each one, examining the events on the battlefield, considering how the troops clashed in detail. We will, through the lens of armed conflict, watch human beings evolve, and emerge changed from the crucible of warfare. We will see echoes of our own present in the struggles of those who went before us.



Here's the scene I want to set – you're a great Hellenistic king. You are a direct descendant of Alexander the Great, who was not only the greatest leader of armies, but the greatest individual warrior the world has ever known. It is his blood flowing in your veins, a lineage that traces back to the very gods themselves. Before you stands an army, brave sons of Macedon, or Syria or Egypt. Descendants of the warriors of Greece, the same men who beat the Persians, the greatest empire on earth.

Your army is the best drilled, best equipped and most beloved of the gods. They are as unmovable as a mountain, as unbreakable as the earth itself. Their spear points are as numerous as the stars, their skin so encased in bronze that they might as well be made of it. They are trained to move and fight as a single organism. They ripple like a viper, just as armored, just as predatory, just as quick. It is a legacy unbroken since before your grandfather's day. The phalanx never loses.

Facing you is an army of Romans. Barbarians who can't even speak Greek. They are armed in a sloppy parody of the glory of Greece. Crude bronze helmets, weird, ungainly shields. They carry javelins like skirmishers, and long knives you're more accustomed to seeing in the hands of butchers and tanners than warriors. With those tiny things, they'll be lucky even to reach your men, let alone harm them. The iron points of your soldiers' spears will skewer them long before they can close.

And for the first battle, and the second maybe, this is true. But as you watch, the Romans learn. They adapt. In battle after battle, they internalize and apply the lessons of their defeats.

And soon, though they lose, it is not so easy.

And sooner than you'd like, they aren't losing any more.

Historiography

Historiography is the study of the study of history. It examines how we research, analyze and write history. This is a book about ancient warfare, and not historiography, so I won't delve too deeply into this topic, but there are some points that need to be made if we're going to understand how we use primary sources and how they affect the stories we tell.

If we're going to learn how to drive a car, we need to know at least some basics

about how the engine runs. This is important because it helps us diagnose cause and effect while we drive. Car dragging to the left after a big boom? We probably blew out a tire. We don't just trust our senses (the boom, the dragging). We rely on our knowledge of how the mechanism works.

The same is true with history. It's critical to take time to study the discipline itself, to understand who the sources are and what their agendas are. Where are they getting their information? What cultural influences and personal goals are affecting the stories they tell?

In today's politically volatile environment, the charge of "fake news" is constantly hurled. We have started to read even the most reputable news sources with a critical eye. What is this TV anchor's agenda? Why are they telling the story they are? This is unsettling, because it makes it difficult to trust, but it is good training for the historian. We must also be on a constant lookout for "fake news" when we examine the sources. We must be skeptical of what the ancient writers say, and the ancient artists portray.

Objectivity

Because ancient writers and artists *did* have agendas. History in the ancient world was designed to entertain as much as it was designed to educate, and many writers were more than happy to fudge or even invent facts in an effort to make a better dramatic narrative. The work of turn of the 1st century Roman historian Titus Livius, better known as "Livy," is a great example of this tendency to dramatize.

Much art and literature in the ancient world was patronized in some way, which is to say that it was made to please a specific client. In many cases the writer had a cultural or historical perspective they wanted to advance, or had to advance, if they wanted to keep their head attached to their body.

Livy wrote during the reign of Augustus, who had ascended to power after a vicious civil war and was in the process of a delicate dance wherein he established himself as an emperor in fact but not in name. Would publishing a history of Rome praising the old republican system offend the new master of Rome? Would Livy be punished for taking this view? How might this affect his writing? Polybius was a Greek kept as a hostage in Rome. He probably had fierce pride in his Greek heritage, but also knew he had to please his Roman captors. Unlike Livy, he was a soldier who had experienced battle first hand. This also gave him a stake in how military legacy is portrayed. He was a client of the Aemilii family, who had a prominent role in the historical events he wrote about. How did these complicated and diverse elements affect Polybius' view of the same events?

The idea that historians should write what is true above all else, that they should be impartial, certainly existed in the ancient world (we see contemporary sources talk about this very thing), but it has been refined and gained greater acceptance in the modern day. As we study history, we have to remember that many ancient sources weren't trying to be objective. It's up to us to interpret their

stories carefully, checking sources against one another, checking written sources against material sources, and applying our own experiences to what we read. In examining sources, historians have to be skeptical detectives.

The Importance of “I don’t know.”

Ancient history is either a really tough field, or a really easy one, depending on how you look at it. The farther back you go in time, the less survives, particularly writing. At the time this book is published, we’ll be going back nearly 2,200 years at the most. This is good if you’re a completist. Ancient history sometimes appeals to collector-types (I freely admit to being one), because it’s possible to read literally all the primary source material we know of on a particular topic. On the other hand, when you’re done, you’re done. You can supplement this with material records from archaeology, such as pottery, masonry, paintings, and arms and armor. You can also consider other scientific evidence, like geography, weather, physics and psychology, but once again, 2,200 years puts a lot of wear and tear on even the toughest materials, including the ground itself. So you run out of historical source material more quickly than you’d like. I’d wager everyone studying ancient history has felt the scholarly equivalent of *Oliver Twist* asking for more food. Even if you haven’t read your Dickens, you probably know that sometimes there just isn’t any more.

And after that, it’s all analysis. This is the historian’s job, to take this meager record and bang it around in our heads until meaning falls out of it. But the truth is that there are many questions that we will never be able to conclusively answer. We can get close, to be sure, but not to the level of certainty that we’d like. Because time has marched on, and there is no additional data. We can’t interview warriors two millennia in their graves. We can’t triple check our sources’ sources, when the sources they were referencing are lost. We’re ready to be pleasantly surprised that new material will be discovered, but we’re not holding our collective breath.

So we guess. That’s right, we are *guessing* at a lot of the details we proclaim so confidently in the pages of books like these. There are heated and ongoing debates surrounding every aspect of ancient warfare. Did hoplites appear suddenly or evolve gradually? Is there a distinctly “Western” way of warfare that originated with the phalanx? How did the Roman battle line deploy exactly? Could the *quincunx* (checkerboard) formation really have worked, as more than one contemporary source attests?

The only correct answer is, “I don’t know.” We often engage in passionate scholarly debates with an air of certainty that makes little sense. Educated guesses remain just that, guesses. I have done my best here to make liberal use of the words “probably,” and “possibly,” as I make my case. I enjoy the freedom to let my imagination run wild, and I love the detective work of history, which is the act of taming that imagination and securing it as tightly to the few facts we have as possible.

But it remains critical that we are just as careful to admit what we don't know as often as we present what we do. It sets an honest backdrop for the story to come, because the truth is that the little we *do* know about warfare in the ancient world is amazing.

Historical Background

The conflicts examined in this book take place almost entirely during the explosion of cultural influence known as the Hellenistic Period, from 323 to 31 BC, and I'll be referencing many of the major events and famous figures of that period. To avoid confusion as you read, below is a very brief background of major political and military developments.

The Kingdom of Macedon defeated a combined Greek force at the Battle of Chaeronea in 338 BC, drawing to a conclusion nearly a century of Greek civil war and effectively bringing Greece (with the exception of Sparta) under Macedonian rule. Philip's son Alexander III, better known as Alexander the Great, then fulfilled his father's vision of campaigning against the Achaemenid Empire of Persia, which at the time extended from the Balkans in the west to the Indus Valley in the east. Alexander successfully subdued the last forces of the Achaemenid Persians in 328 BC. He continued to campaign further east into the Indian subcontinent until a rebellion by his troops finally forced him to turn back.

Alexander's untimely death in 323 BC led to the fragmentation of his empire into warring kingdoms led by his squabbling generals. These generals, known as the *diadochi* or "successors," fought a series of wars that spanned nearly the next half-century, until order was finally restored in 275 BC. A number of new kingdoms crystallized out of this period of ceaseless fighting, but the three most important for the purposes of this book are the Antigonids, Seleucids and Ptolemaics. These kingdoms were each named for their founders, former generals under Alexander the Great – Antigonius I Monophthalmus (the one-eyed), Seleucus I Nicator (the victor), and Ptolemy I Soter (the savior). Two of these kingdoms, the Antigonids and the Seleucids, would come into sharp conflict with Rome in the decades to come.

Rome itself threw out its kings and reinvented itself as a republic in 509 BC, and then slowly began to subdue its neighbors, spreading across the Italian peninsula through a series of conflicts, most notably the Samnite and Latin Wars, until by 264 BC, it dominated all of Italy. This brought Rome into conflict with the great Mediterranean trading power Carthage, which had its capital in what is now Tunisia. Competition for control of the Mediterranean basin led to the First Punic War from 264 to 241 BC, which saw Carthage defeated and Rome in control of Sicily, as well as the annexation of the islands of Corsica and Sardinia by Rome. Carthage chafed under humiliating peace terms, until the brilliant Carthaginian general Hannibal Barca led Carthage into the Second Punic War against Rome, from 218 to 201 BC. Hannibal was a military genius the likes of

whom had never before been seen, and overcame amazing odds to inflict several incredible defeats on a numerically superior Roman enemy. His campaign across the Alps and into Italy peaked with the legendary Battle of Cannae in 216 BC, where he won a stunning victory that effectively annihilated the Roman army in a single day. But Hannibal was unable to capitalize on this victory, and the Romans eventually produced a brilliant general of their own, the famous Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus, who finally brought the Carthaginians to heel and effectively won the war for Rome at the Battle of Zama in 202 BC.

The constant struggle for military dominance resulted in the rise of two competing infantry formations, born of the military experience of two distinct cultures – the Romans in the western Mediterranean, and the successors in the eastern. The former gave rise to the legion, and the latter the phalanx. Both the Romans and the successors spanned vast swathes of territory, and subjugated many different peoples. As a result, they were both polyglot and culturally diverse. This resulted in variations across regions. A Roman consul campaigning over the Alps outside of Italy might boast a large contingent of Celtic allied warband-style infantry in his legion. A Seleucid general might have “imitation legionaries” beside his phalanx. But overall, there were universal characteristics to the Roman legion and Hellenistic phalanx that provided the sharp contrast in arms, equipment, deployment and fighting style that make examining how they fought one another so fascinating.

The Fundamentals of Ancient Battle

There are some basic concepts that are almost universal across all ancient battles, and certainly across the period of the 3rd through the 2nd centuries BC that we’re examining in this book. In order to properly understand the breakdowns of the battles that follow, it’s important to understand these fundamentals. Any officer, commissioned or non-commissioned, will have learned these basics in academy, and most wargamers pick them up as they simulate battles and see them play out on the table top. But for those of you who are neither wargamers, nor prior service members, we’ll review them here. Please keep in mind this is grossly oversimplified, and deliberately so, as I’m trying to convey basic ideas to the reader as efficiently and simply as possible.

Before we launch into this, I want to make sure readers understand the terms “rank” and “file,” as they’ll be used frequently throughout the book. Most readers are probably familiar with the terms, but just to be sure, files refer to lines of soldiers arranged front-to-back of a formation. Ranks refers to the lines from side to side. So a single line of 16 men standing one behind the other would be a single file with 16 ranks. A line of the same men standing shoulder to shoulder would be 16 files and only one rank.

The battle line, frontage and flanking maneuvers

Ancient battles usually revolved around battle lines. A battle line is exactly what it sounds like – a bunch of soldiers or warriors all lined up, more or less shoulder to shoulder, usually laterally, providing as much “frontage,” or left to right distance, as possible.

More frontage is good, because this increases the chance of an “envelopment” or preferably a “double-envelopment.” An envelopment occurs when a battle line overlaps the enemy’s, allowing your line to curl around it and attack your opponent’s line from both the front and the side, which is commonly called the “flank” by both modern militaries and military historians. This envelopment, and the striking of the enemy’s battle line from the flank, is commonly called “outflanking” or “turning a flank.” A double-envelopment occurs when your line overlaps the enemy on both flanks, allowing you to curl in around both sides of the enemy line at once, as the famous Carthaginian general Hannibal Barca did at the Battle of Cannae in 216 BC.

Troop types – heavy infantry, light infantry and cavalry

Battle lines are almost always composed of “heavy infantry.” This term is used to mean different things, sometimes referring to the weight of the soldiers’ weapons and armor, and sometimes referring to the tightness of their formation. A Greek or Hellenistic (Hellenistic refers to the cultural descendants of the Greeks, such as the Macedonians and the successors of Alexander the Great) phalanx, a Roman legion, a Celtic warband, a line of Persian levy spearmen, are all examples of heavy infantry in a battle line. The heavy infantryman’s primary job was close or “shock” combat, fighting with hand weapons like swords or spears, toe to toe with the enemy.

The battle lines would line up facing one another, and then close to clash together. The opposing forces usually had one of three goals:

- To break through the enemy line, causing it to collapse
- To outflank the enemy line and attack the enemy from two directions at once.
- To get units *behind* the enemy’s battle line, said to be in the enemy’s rear or “backfield,” and attack the enemy units from the rear.

The benefits of flanking and rear attacks are plain. If you only have to worry about the enemy in front of you, you can focus your full attention on that enemy. This is why battle lines are so strong everywhere but the flanks. If you have a friendly soldier to either side of you, your flanks are covered, and all you have to do is deal with the enemy straight ahead. If you have a shield, you only have to cover your front, and all your attacks will be in one direction. If you have an enemy on your front *and* your flank, you’re in trouble. Now, you have to fight in two directions at once. You move your shield to defend against a spear thrust coming from the enemy in front of you, and the enemy to your flank has an open shot at your ribs. You shift your shield to cover your ribs, and the enemy in front of you puts his sword through your face. Being attacked from the *rear* is a veritable death sentence, since you can’t defend at all, and turning to face the

enemy to your rear necessarily exposes your rear to the enemy who was previously to your front. In this instance, the only hope you have is your armor.

So covering the flanks, and therefore the rear, of the battle line was critical. Many generals used terrain, anchoring the flanks of their battle lines on marsh, or mountains, or deep rivers. The idea was that the enemy couldn't turn a flank, because he couldn't pass the terrain to do it. But, assuming that terrain wasn't available, ancient generals usually stationed troops on the flanks who had the double role of both protecting their battle line from envelopment, and also turning the enemy battle line's flank if they could.

This job was most often performed by cavalry, whose speed made them ideally suited for the task. Let's say you defeat your enemy's flank guard and now have an opportunity to get into their backfield to attack their units from the rear. You want to be able to get there as quickly as possible, to put your enemy in the pinch where they are attacked from both front and rear before they can do the same to you. Mounted troops are ideal for this work. Because they are the fastest troops on the field, they can also take the lead in running down "routing" troops. Routing troops are running away with no effort to keep fighting, as opposed to "retreating," which means you are leaving the battle in good order, fighting as you go.

Another troop type was commonly seen in ancient battles – light infantry, sometimes referred to as "skirmishers." These troops usually fought in dispersed order. Think of a cloud of gnats or a school of minnows. This formation is very different from the shoulder-to-shoulder ordered ranks of the heavy infantry described above. Skirmishers were usually lightly armored, and in many cases had no armor at all. They were often armed with missile weapons, such as the javelin, the sling or the bow. Heavy infantry moved more slowly, both on account of their equipment and because of their need to keep in formation or else risk the flank and rear attacks I just described. More often than not, heavy infantry had no missile weapons of their own, which made them vulnerable to skirmishers, who could run up, shower them with missile fire, then run away before the heavy infantry could charge them. Not all light infantry were skirmishers, and not all heavy infantry lacked missile weapons (most notably, the Roman legionary), but the distinction between heavy and light infantry and their respective shock and missile delivery roles was the general rule on ancient battlefields.

Of course, skirmishers were vulnerable to cavalry, who could easily catch them, and often were armed with missiles themselves (usually javelins), but if the cavalry stopped to fight hand to hand with skirmishers, they in turn would be vulnerable to being charged by the heavy infantry.

Skirmishers usually deployed out in front of the battle line, and their main role was to "soften up" the enemy battle line with missile fire, causing wounds, deaths and damage to equipment that would impair the enemy's ability to fight in the close combat to come when the battle lines clashed. When that clash appeared imminent, the skirmishers would "retire" either by rushing back through the ranks of the heavy infantry (who would open to admit them), or rushing around

the flanks of their own battle line to get out of the way.

Unit cohesion and morale

Two more things to note here: “cohesion,” the ability for military formations to *stay* in formation even when they’re moving and fighting, is critical to this sort of combat. Since each soldier in a formation protects the flanks of the soldiers next to them, if the cohesion of a battle line fails, individual soldiers suddenly become susceptible to flank and rear attacks. Keeping cohesion was a constant challenge when you consider that most ancient formations consisted of thousands of people. Everything, from marching straight ahead, to backing up, to inclining or “wheeling” or something as simple as opening up enough to let the retiring skirmishers through risked the spread of disorder, creating gaps in the line as some soldiers marched more slowly than others, or stumbled, or bumped into the men around them. This disorder could lead to exposure to flank and rear attacks, and sow confusion in the ranks. And it was all complicated by the lack of advanced communications technology such as radio or loudspeakers, and with many of the soldiers wearing helmets that made it hard to hear. Relaying commands that might help control disorder was very difficult. Ancient battles were, at their heart, attempts to control chaos. The legion and the phalanx, like all military formations, were an effort to provide this control, ordering soldiers for mutual defense, to make the best use of their particular equipment, and to instill the heart and discipline necessary to keep it together in the midst of the nightmare of battle.

For both legions and phalanxes, constant drill was the best way to ensure that cohesion was maintained. This is still true in militaries today. During my time in the Coast Guard, whenever we weren’t out on an operation, we were training. We practiced simple tasks like shooting, cleaning and storing our weapons, repairing the boats, performing first aid, and even administrative tasks like filling out paperwork, again and again and again until we became almost automatons, able to act without thinking. In the chaos of a fight, where seconds become critical, this ability to act instantly can be the difference between life and death. I’m sure this experience will resonate with any reader from any country in the world who has ever served with the military.

Confusion in the ranks lowered morale, which is the pivotal element in ancient battles. The vast majority of casualties in any ancient battle did not occur during the fighting, but during the rout, when one side’s nerve broke and they abandoned any semblance of cohesion for a full-scale flight, with every man for himself, trying to escape with his life.

Bringing the enemy to this panic point was the primary goal of most ancient generals. Many factors play into morale: training, unit pride and *esprit de corps*, quality of equipment, physical health, rest and food, the inspiration of leaders and the belief in a just cause. In tight formations and on battlefields where communication was spotty and difficult and with most of the soldiery deeply superstitious, panic was a constant risk. The sight of one unit fleeing might

indicate a tiny setback in one limited portion of the battlefield, or it might mean the defeat of the entire army, and it was up to the individual soldier to judge, moment to moment, whether it was worth it to stay in the fight or to look to his own life. Every single battle examined in this book eventually ends when the level of panic overwhelms the discipline of one side, and they finally turn to rout, and the carnage of the pursuit begins.

Even today, the critical importance of standing firm in the face of the enemy is underscored by Article 85 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, the system of law that governs military members in the United States. Anyone who “... *quits his unit, organization, or place of duty with intent to avoid hazardous duty or to shirk important service*” may be punished under the article.

The penalty, in time of war, is death.



II

NOT YOUR FATHER'S PHALANX: THE LEGACY OF IPHICRATES

*You have the Pyrrhic dance as yet,
Where is the Pyrrhic phalanx gone?
Of two such lessons, why forget
The nobler and the manlier one?*

Lord Byron, *Isles of Greece*

The 2006 Zack Snyder film, *300*, cemented the phalanx in pop culture. For the vast majority of us, watching a fictionalized and stylized Leonidas and his Spartiate (those aristocratic citizens of the city-state who went through the rigorous and intensive warrior training that made the Spartans famous) comrades-in-arms lock shields and present spears, was the first experience of this critical formation. The film was based on a 1998 comic by the legendary Frank Miller, who also gave us Batman's rebirth as the Dark Knight. Miller, to his credit, based the comic on our best primary source for the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC, Herodotus' *Histories*. A lot of the film's best one-liners like: "We will fight in the shade," a retort to the threat that the numerous Persian arrows would blot out the sun, are straight out of Herodotus.

But this was by no means the first phalanx. In fact, the phalanx Herodotus described and Frank Miller and Zack Snyder later depicted was highly evolved, a method of war that had been refined for centuries and was already reaching its zenith and moving onto a stagnant plateau that invited innovators to come along and make it better.

It was only another century after the Battle of Thermopylae before major innovations in phalanx warfare were introduced, first by the famous Theban general Epaminondas and the Athenian general Iphicrates, and later by the Macedonian kings including the famous Philip II and his son Alexander the Great, who would shepherd the phalanx through its final transformation into the instrument of war that would confront the Roman legion.

The "classical" phalanx of hoplites wasn't the Hellenistic phalanx that went toe to toe with the Roman legion, and so it is outside the scope of this study. However, in order to properly understand the Hellenistic phalanx that is in

scope, we need to know a little about it.

Phalanx – Classic

The origin of the phalanx is a subject of debate among historians but there is evidence for the phalanx being a lot older than many people believe. The Stele of Vultures, a monument that is currently exhibited at the Louvre in Paris, and might be more than 4,600 years old, depicts a Sumerian formation of spearmen that can certainly be described as a phalanx. The soldiers, troops from the state of Lagash battling against neighboring Umma, are shown in ranks, forming a line of locked shields and presenting a wall of spear points toward an enemy.

Many will debate the transition into the “Homeric” style of warfare, and its emphasis on individual combat and chariots, but pretty much everybody agrees that the phalanx emerged as the singular formation used by the ancient Greeks in the 8th century. This “classical” phalanx was fairly simple. It was composed of the hoplite (Greek *hoplitēs*), from the Greek *hopla* for “panoply” or “gear.” Some claim that *hopla* comes from the term for the shield used by hoplites, but this is pretty well debunked, and most scholars agree that hoplite loosely means “the guy with the equipment.”

The hoplite system enforced rule by the wealthy, because in most *poleis* (a *polis* was an ancient Greek city-state) you had to serve in the phalanx as a hoplite to have a voice in government, and in order to serve in the phalanx, you had to be able to afford your own equipment.

The gear which gave the hoplite his name wasn’t cheap. In fact, it was the “Star Wars” technology of its time: a round, bronze-faced shield, roughly 3 feet across, called an *aspis*, with an offset rim, an important distinction from the shields used by later phalanxes, as we will see.

Hoplites carried a one-handed, iron-tipped spear around 6–8 feet long called a *doru* or *dory*, with a bronze butt-spike called the “lizard-killer” (*sauroter*). This butt-spike probably saw more service killing people than lizards, sometimes as they lay wounded, or as a backup in case the spearhead was snapped off. It may also have served the extra function of providing a barrier against moisture when the spear’s butt was set against the ground, preventing rot from taking hold in the wood.

Hoplites also carried a sword, usually the *xiphos*, a straight, sometimes leaf-bladed, double-edged cut and thrust weapon that was anywhere from 1 to 2 feet long. This sword was intended as a backup weapon, to be employed when the spear was broken or lost. Other swords or knives were also used, such as the *kopis*, a slightly curving blade sharp on one side, like a cleaver.

Those who could afford it might wear a bronze “cuirass,” a breast and back plate taken together, either shaped like a bell or embossed with stylized or even realistic muscles. Hoplites also wore a single or pair of bronze greaves. And of course, hoplites wore a helmet. The most common helmet associated with hoplites is the “Corinthian” type, named after the Greek *polis* of Corinth. You see

Corinthian helmets in 300, with a T- or Y-shaped slit for breathing and seeing, usually a tall crest to increase the wearer's height and to make them appear more fearsome, and otherwise completely covering the face, head and some of the neck. But this was by no means the only type of hoplite helmet, and many other patterns exist, most also named after *poleis* or regions.

Modern estimates of all this gear have it weighing over 40 pounds. That may not seem like a lot, but when you factor in marching and fighting, possibly in hot sun and on broken ground, the strain becomes incredible to imagine. This is actually less than the 60 pounds of gear the average modern infantryman carries, but that weight is much better and more comfortably balanced. Ancient Greek warriors didn't have aluminum frame packs, padded straps, plastic clips, zippers and elastic bands. Their 40 pounds was all metal, wood and leather, chafing and biting, lumped in odd places: the heavy bronze helmet on the head, the big shield entirely on the left arm, the bronze greaves riding on the ankles.

Even more stressful was the new way in which the shield was carried. Most ancient shields had a central "boss," a kind of metal bowl that sticks out of the shield's center. Your hand goes inside the bowl, grasping a single, usually horizontal handle. When your arm gets tired, you simply straighten it, letting the shield rest against your leg. The shield boss protects your hand and also turns the shield into a kind of metal boxing glove, which you can use to push or punch an enemy. The hoplite shield, however, was equipped with the *porpax*, a metal loop through which the wielder stuck his arm, and the *antilabē*, a loop or handle on the shield's edge that he gripped with his hand. This loaded all the weight on the wielder's forearm, supported by his shoulder. The *aspis* was bowl-shaped, which allowed the wielder to rest his arm and let the edge of the bowl settle the shield's weight on the shoulder, and possibly his hip or leg, if he was resting the shield edge against it. But while resting the shield like this is possible, most black and red-figure Greek pottery from this period depicts what appear to be hoplites holding their shields out from their bodies, rather than resting the *aspis'* considerable weight, over 15 pounds, flat across the body. If you're having a hard time picturing how difficult this is, go to a gym, hold your arm out from your body, and balance a 15-pound dumbbell on it. See how long you can hold it for. Even if the hoplite held some of the shield's weight on his shoulder or hip, it would still require immense strength and endurance to use it effectively for long. Ancient Greek warriors must have been in amazing shape, displaying the wiry muscular endurance of elite athletes.

And this was critical, because keeping the shield up was critical. Classical hoplite phalanxes required cohesion above all. The 5th century BC historian and general Thucydides is our best source for classical hoplite warfare, and he tells us that during the First Battle of Mantinea, in 418 BC, around 62 years after the events depicted in 300, the outcome was drastically affected by the fact that the opposing phalanxes slid to their right, since each hoplite was trying to cover himself using the shield of man beside him. This tells us two things – first, that the hoplite shield, worn on the left arm, gave better protection to the left side.

Second, it shows the tight, cohesive nature of the classical phalanx, a formation that depended on near perfect synchronicity of movement and action.

It makes sense. If you are facing a classical phalanx head on, you see a wall of shields that covers all the hoplites from the tops of their knees to the bottom of their faces. Above the shield's rim, you see a bronze helmet. Below it, bronze greaves. If the phalanx is holding formation correctly, there is almost no exposed flesh that isn't covered by metal. Done right, the phalanx is impenetrable.

But the moment that cohesion breaks, gaps appear in the line, and that exposes the hoplite. You might be able to shoot an arrow, throw a javelin or thrust a spear into a hoplite's ribs, or his neck, or his unarmored thigh. With the classical phalanx (and later phalanxes too, as we will see), everything depends on keeping those shields locked, moving together, not presenting gaps to the enemy.

And that's what classical hoplites did. They looked at combat as the *agōn*, "the struggle," the same word used to describe an athletic challenge. This struggle was played out through the *othismos*, "the push," where the phalanxes, 8–12 ranks deep, slammed into one another, stabbing over and under their shields as they engaged in a rugby-style shoving match, which continued until one side broke and fled. The idea of the *othismos* is hotly debated, with some scholars insisting that wasn't how hoplites actually fought. I am accepting it as true here because I don't want to go down a rabbit-hole of competing theories. This book focuses on Hellenistic phalanxes, not classical ones.

The classical phalanx was a forward-facing formation. It could only fight in one direction. Attacked from the flank or the rear, it was done for. To prevent this, classical phalanxes employed cavalry and light troops, called *psiloi*, who also sometimes served the role of "softening up" enemy formations by peppering them with missiles – javelins, sling stones and arrows. The role of light troops and cavalry is the topic for several books in and of itself, but we are only concerned with the heavy infantry for this one.

While it's debatable when this "classical" style of warfare began and ended, it certainly dominated the Greek theater of war including much of modern Turkey and the Middle East for over 150 years, from at least 500 BC to around 338 BC.

Phalanx – The Next Generation

Innovation is usually not a sudden thing. It happens gradually, as people recognize deficiencies in a way of doing something, and engage in the slow process of trial and error that eventually brings about reform and improvement. It's doubtful that the phalanx changed overnight, but the lack of source material for ancient history makes it seem like it did. It gives the impression that the ancient Greeks fought one way, and then, suddenly, the Macedonians took over and they fought with a new, improved phalanx. This is unlikely. As we'll see with the legion, there's ancient evidence for military changes occurring gradually, and there's also, of course, life experience. Militaries are conservative institutions, and slow to introduce change. There are also numerous examples of militaries having

hybrid approaches as they move from one kind of equipment or tactic to another.

Epaminondas the innovator

The Peloponnesian Wars were a struggle to rule Greece between the Delian League – dominated by Athens – and the Peloponnesian League – dominated by Sparta. In 404 BC, Sparta emerged victorious, and effectively ruled Greece for about 30 years.

When the city-state of Thebes attempted to expand its influence over the region of Boeotia in northern Greece, Sparta challenged it, resulting in the Battle of Leuctra in 371 BC. Thebes won this battle decisively, and took over as the premier city-state in Greece until the Second Battle of Mantinea in 362 BC, which left both Sparta and Thebes weakened and ripe for conquest. Philip II of Macedon finally achieved this at the Battle of Chaeronea in 338 BC, which saw the Macedonians become the dominant force in Greece.

300 may have exaggerated much about Spartan society, but it was rooted closer to truth than lies in its description of Sparta's military system. The *agōgē* trained male children for war from the age of seven, and this intense commitment to military excellence was imbued in every aspect of Spartan culture. The Spartans were legendary warriors not just to us now, looking back at history, but to their contemporaries. Given Sparta's reputation, the Theban hoplites couldn't have advanced to Leuctra confident of victory. Worse, the Thebans were badly outnumbered. By some estimates, Sparta had a numerical advantage of around 4,000 troops.

Epaminondas was one of the Boeotarchs, a kind of chief officer for the Boeotian League, of which Thebes was the paramount member. Boeotarchs also acted as generals in the field. Epaminondas first convinced his wavering fellow leaders to meet the Spartans in battle, and then introduced two key military innovations which are said to have been the reason the Thebans won against the odds.

I mentioned Thucydides' description of the First Battle of Mantinea earlier, and in particular how the hoplite phalanx slid to the right as it advanced. Here's Thucydides' exact quote:

All armies are similar in this: on going into battle they get forced out rather on their right wing, and one and the other overlap with their adversary's left; because fear makes each man do his best to shelter his unarmed side with the shield of the man next him on the right, thinking that the closer the shields are locked together the better will he be protected. The man primarily responsible for this is the first on the right wing, who is always trying to withdraw from the enemy his unarmed side; and the same fear makes the rest follow him.

To counter this tendency to slide to the right, ancient Greek commanders often stationed their most experienced, elite troops on the right side of the battle line. The thought was that these troops would be the bravest and most disciplined, so they wouldn't slide as much. This was the case at Leuctra, where the Spartan king Cleombrotus I stationed his elite Spartiates along with his *hippeis* on his right.

The word *hippeis* means cavalry, but in this period, it referred to the king's personal bodyguard and it is likely that these men were elite infantry hoplites. Cleombrotus was clearly thinking the Thebans would do the same with their own elite unit, the "Sacred Band," composed of 150 pairs of homosexual lovers, who fought all the more bravely for having the object of their affections fighting right beside them.

But Epaminondas didn't do that. Instead, he put the Sacred Band on his left, and stacked that side of the phalanx with even more troops, making it 50 ranks deep, as opposed to the usual 8–12. This, of course, made the rest of the phalanx thinner, and Epaminondas compensated for this with his second military innovation – he deployed the phalanx in an oblique, pushing the left side forward and "refusing" (holding back) the right side. His gamble was clear, he was betting that he would break the Spartan right before their stronger left could overwhelm his right.

Keep in mind that thousands of men on a battlefield kick up a lot of dust, reducing visibility even in the best conditions. We're dealing with a time before radar, or aviation, or cameras. This possibly allowed Epaminondas to hide his additional ranks in plain sight. All the Spartans would have seen would be the front of his battle line, with no idea how many additional troops were behind it. This is a tactic that would later be used by Hannibal Barca at Cannae in 216 BC, where he stacked his African veterans on his flanks, hidden in plain sight behind his battle line.

It worked like a charm. The stacked Theban left smashed through the Spartan right, eliminating Sparta's best troops almost immediately and killing Cleombrotus. Meanwhile, the weakened Theban right was refused, and so the Spartan left didn't have time to properly engage it before their own right was smashed. With their best troops routed and their king dead, the Spartans gave up the fight, and the Thebans had the victory.

These two innovations, the placement of elite troops on the left along with the increase of rank depth, and the refusal of the right, may seem simple, but they were revolutionary for the time, and the decisive Theban victory at Leuctra proved their worth. Epaminondas had done something new with the classical phalanx, experimenting with depth of ranks and the angle of the battle line. This spirit of experimentation would prove to be a genie that wouldn't go back in the bottle.

Iphicrates the reformer

The other famous innovator of this period was a contemporary of Epaminondas, the Athenian general Iphicrates. While not nearly as famous as Epaminondas, his reforms to hoplite battle were every bit as significant.

Where Epaminondas is famous for his reforms to deployment, Iphicrates is famous for his reforms to equipment and training. Both are equally important in producing the phalanxes that are the subject of this book.

Iphicrates believed that reach was critical. Why bash shields with an enemy

hoplite and stay in the range of his spear, when you could stand off and kill him before he even reached you? Iphicrates doubled the 8-foot spear to make a 16-foot pike.

Pikes are heavier and differently balanced, and need two hands to be used effectively. This makes the large, heavy shield used by hoplites impractical, especially when you're using your left hand to hold the shield's handle. To solve this problem, Iphicrates introduced the *peltē*, a smaller, lighter shield without the offset rim of the *aspis*. It was about a foot smaller in diameter and thus much lighter. This allowed it to be strapped to the hoplite's forearm, with his hand protruding past the shield's edge, freeing it to wield the longer pike. This shield lent the name *peltastai*, men who wield the *peltē*. This can be confusing, as many writers refer to skirmishing light troops using missile weapons as "peltasts," most notably Thracian javelineers, because they also carried a smaller shield. It's important to note that Iphicratean *peltastai* are not the same troops. The better word to describe skirmishers is the Greek *psiloi*, from *psilos* meaning "naked" or "bare".

Iphicrates also lengthened the sword used by hoplites and replaced the heavy bronze cuirass with a lighter *linothorax*, a cuirass made of linen. The son of a shoemaker, he also made innovations to military footwear and the light boot he introduced was named the "Iphicratid" after him.

Iphicrates recognized that the longer pike and the smaller shield made the cohesion of the phalanx even more critical than before, and so he emphasized rigorous training and endless drill.

Those familiar with the newer phalanxes of the Hellenistic age will recognize a lot of their arms and armor in Iphicrates' *peltastai*. Does this mean that he is the man who invented them? The only honest answer is that we don't know. His reforms almost certainly influenced the later Macedonian kings who used them to expand their power.

Many historians credit Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great, with the innovations in phalanx warfare that saw Macedon rise to prominence, but there are numerous competing theories, including some that state these innovations came from the Balkans, or Egypt, or that Iphicrates' and Epaminondas' reforms were implemented by Philip II's father, Amyntas III, or Philip II's brother, Alexander II. Keeping in mind that militaries change slowly, and that old and new equipment and tactical systems often exist side by side as the change occurs, it's likely that Iphicrates' reforms were slowly introduced and improved on by later Macedonian kings over a long period of time.

We do know that Iphicrates was Amyntas III's adopted son and was very close to Alexander II. A staunch champion of the Argaeds, the family of Philip II and Alexander the Great, Iphicrates helped defeat the usurper Pausanias, allowing the Argaeds to maintain their hold on power. Alexander II was almost certainly familiar with Iphicrates' reforms, as was most likely Amyntas III and his son, Philip II.

Philip II also spent three years as a hostage in the court of Epaminondas in

Thebes until 364 BC. Philip II was the *eromenos* (lover) of Pelopidas, the Theban general and statesman who was Epaminondas' dear friend. While in Thebes, Philip lived with Pammenes, another famous Theban general. Keep in mind that aristocratic hostages in the ancient world weren't like hostages taken in modern times. They were kept as a guarantee of their family's good behavior, but were more often than not treated as honored guests, and often became *de facto* members of the custodial family. Theon Greyjoy's relationship with the Stark family on the hit TV show *Game of Thrones* is a great example of the relationship between the custodial family and the "hostage."

So, it is highly likely that Philip II observed and was influenced by both Epaminondas' and Iphicrates' military innovations, though whether this came directly from the two Greeks, or was passed down to him from his Argaed family is debated. Either way, these influences are critical to our understanding of the Hellenistic phalanxes which are at the heart of this book. Because, after his time as Epaminondas' hostage, Philip II rose to become one of the greatest commanders of his age. By the time of his assassination in 336 BC, Macedon was the dominant force in the entire Greek theater, ruling all of Macedonia, Thrace and Greece, save "neutral" Sparta and Crete. Philip II's son, Alexander the Great (Alexander III), would expand this empire to include all of "Asia" as far as the Indus river in India.

Both of these achievements were made possible by the new Macedonian phalanx, an entity that incorporated both the tactical reforms of Epaminondas and the technological reforms of Iphicrates, united to make an unstoppable infantry formation capable of conquering the entire known world.

Exit the Hoplite – the Foot Companions

The classical hoplite who had fought for centuries on battlefields from Plataea to Leuctra was in decline. In his place was the *pezhetairos*, the "foot companion" of the Macedonian kings. As with nearly everything in this book, this is debated, with some scholars saying the term referred to a special unit in the Macedonian phalanx, and others saying it referred to the entire phalanx. It's more likely that the title of "foot companions" was given to every soldier in the phalanx, in an effort to make them feel more closely and personally bound to their king.

Weapons

These "phalangites" used the *sarissa*, a two-handed, iron-headed pike around 16–21 feet long. These were average lengths, and some sources report pikes as short as 15 and as long as 26 feet. Examination of the sockets of surviving pike heads and butt-spikes allows us to estimate that the shafts were about 1 ½ inches in diameter. Such a long weapon would have been cumbersome to transport and store, and the archaeological excavation of a metal tube-like socket is evidence that these pikes were carried and stored in halves, and then linked together using

the metal socket when it was time to fight. Some scholars have speculated that the top half of the pike had the head and the tube permanently attached, which allowed the top half to be used alone as a spear or even as a javelin.

The pike's triangular iron head was likely surprisingly small and designed to pierce armor and shields. There are numerous references to the armor-piercing characteristics of the pike head. My description of the Battle of Pydna in chapter IX is largely drawn from the turn of the 1st century AD Greek biographer Plutarch. Plutarch describes Antigonid pike heads punching through both armor and shield of their enemies. The 1st century BC Greek historian Diodorus Siculus also describes Macedonian pikes used by Alexander the Great's phalangites driving through shields, "*and on into their lungs*" during his Indian campaign. The turn of the 1st century BC Roman poet Gracilius specifically describes the pike heads as "little teeth." Gracilius also uses the word "*contos*," a reference to a long cavalry spear. We can figure out by context that he is definitely talking about the Macedonian pike, and this word substitution is important to remember, as we will see later. The smaller head also makes sense in the context of the pike's enormous length, because the lighter weight on the far end would be less likely to cause the shaft to bend.

Historians used to believe the shafts were made from tough cornell wood, a kind of sour cherry tree, but more recent analysis has debunked this theory in favor of the lighter, more common ash, the same wood that was used for the hoplite spear. The exact composition is still a matter of debate, with those who favor cornell leaning mostly on the turn of the 4th century BC Greek philosopher Theophrastus. Those who favor ash rely on much later sources, like the 1st century AD Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder, and his contemporary, the Roman poet Statius. But while the people who favor cornell are relying on earlier sources, ash is the much more likely material. Cornell is very dense and very heavy, and having held a pike level for long periods during reenactments, even with my arms straightened, I can say first hand that you want the lightest shaft you can get. I'm in pretty good shape, and my arms were so tired they were shaking after no more than 15 minutes, and even less when I was actively trying to spear targets.

The pike had a butt-spike like the hoplite spear. It was usually bronze and flanged, with a projecting spike that allowed it to be stuck in the ground to brace it against an enemy charge, or to perform the "lizard-killing" functions that we saw with the butt-spike on the hoplite spear. The butt-spike also provided a backup weapon if the pike's primary head was snapped off.

Its great length made this weapon next to useless in single combat. The lethal part of the weapon was around 13 feet away from the person using it. If an enemy closed past the sharp pike head, you'd find yourself facing him with what basically amounted to a giant, heavy broomstick. Polybius tells us that the Hellenistic phalanx allowed roughly 3 feet per man, plenty of room for a fast, agile warrior to dodge between pike heads and close to sword range.

But Hellenistic phalanxes had a solution to this. Whereas the classical phalanx

was, apart from the rare exception we saw with Epaminondas, 12 ranks deep at most, these later phalanxes normally deployed 16. Here's where the pike's great length pays off. In a classical phalanx, using an 8-foot spear, only the front rank, or possibly the front two ranks, could effectively stab at the enemy while staying in formation. But with a 16–21 foot pike, the first four, or even five ranks could use their weapons effectively. That meant that even if you made it past the first line of pike heads, you'd run straight onto the second, and if by some miracle you made it past them, you'd be spitted on the third, and so on.

When thousands of phalangites formed together in ranks, presenting the points of their pikes in unison, the enemy would confront a literal forest of iron, projecting up to 15 feet beyond the front line. Polybius tells us that each phalangite in the front rank would have five pike heads in front of him at three-foot intervals. Sure, if an enemy could close, he could wreak havoc, but looking at the mass of sharpened pike heads, and the enormous distance he'd have to cover to reach the phalangite, he'd realize it would be a suicide mission. If he was fast enough, agile enough, he might be able to make it, but someone was going to get killed in the initial rush. Would it be him? Would it be his friends, beside whom he'd fought and slept and shared hardship and pain? There is a reason that ancient warriors hesitated, quaked in fear at the thought of taking on a Hellenistic phalanx in close combat.

If he did get past the pikes, the danger lessened, but didn't vanish. Each phalangite was also armed with a sword, a *kopis* not much different from the ones carried by his classical hoplite forerunners. The phalangite's primary weapon was the pike. They didn't favor the sword, and weren't as strong with that weapon, but it did mean that they weren't defenseless if an enemy got beyond the range of the pike's head.

Armor

The phalangite was protected by armor similar to the *hopla*, some of the most complete and heavy armor of its time.

We know the phalangites wore bronze helmets, but the turn of the 2nd century AD Roman writer Julius Africanus tells us that the *pilos* style of helmet was introduced into wide use by Alexander the Great, in an effort to give soldiers better visibility. It's likely that the *pilos* style was the most common by the time of the first battle this book covers, but it's also probable that other patterns were used as well.

The *pilos* helmet resembled the short, conical felt or leather cap of the same name that was popular with travelers. Historians speculate that the bronze helmet was worn over the cap of the same shape, which provided padding and absorbed sweat. Some coins from the period show representations of the *pilos* helmet with attached cheek pieces. Some sources refer to the *pilos* as a *kōnos*, and Hellenistic helmet expert Petros Dintsis's "Konos" category consists of *pilos* helmets with a brim, often in Boeotian style, with the metal rippling like fabric. It makes sense that the *pilos* came into wide use, as it's incredibly simple and would have been

easy to make. This would help if a commander were trying to gear up a lot of soldiers quickly for a campaign, or to rapidly replace helmets that were lost or damaged on the march or in battle.

If we look at the Corinthian-style helmet popular with the older hoplite, the switch to the *pilos* style makes sense. While the Corinthian helmet provides better protection to the neck and face, it does so at the price of reduced breathability and vision. In the often-oppressive heat of the Mediterranean, it's not surprising that Hellenistic soldiers were willing to trade some protection for the ability to cool down more quickly, breathe more easily, and see and hear better.

But we should remember that metal helmets were very expensive, and metal lasts a long time. It's unlikely that soldiers or state armories would have tossed away old helmets while they were still serviceable, and phalangites likely used other helmet types as well. While common soldiers had their gear issued by the kingdom, it is likely that officers bought their own, and may have preferred, or been required, to have fancier stuff, both to visually distinguish them from common troops and to allow someone to estimate their status at a glance. It is equally likely that officers, especially nobles, would wear helmets finer than a plain *pilos*. This is supported by the fact that imagery of great Hellenistic generals like Alexander the Great and Pyrrhus of Epirus wearing helmets don't depict them wearing the plain *pilos*.

We know that Hellenistic helmets had plumes and crests. There are quite a few representations in art, and several recovered helmets have plume holders or similar attachments. The turn of the 4th century BC playwright Menander describes a "*feather-crested chiliarchēs*" in one of his plays, more evidence that officers wore feathers on their helmets.

In some art, Hellenistic helmets are shown painted blue and yellow, though historians debate if the helmets were actually painted these colors, or if those colors are meant to depict iron (blue) and bronze (yellow).

For the most part, the phalangite wore the *linothorax* instead of the bronze cuirass. Unfortunately, fabric rots quickly, leaving no trace, and no actual *linothorakes* survive. We're left to guess at how this body armor was made, how it fit and how well it protected, but a number of experimental archaeologists (also called historical reenactors) have done great practical research, so our guess in this case is pretty good. The godfather of this is Professor Greg Aldrete at University of Wisconsin – Green Bay, who has recreated linen cuirasses using period methods and subjected them to a wide range of tests from period weapons.

Reconstructed linen cuirasses are made of a series of linen layers, as many as 15, glued together to produce a thickness of a little more than a quarter-inch. Repeated tests showed this to be proof against a variety of arrows shot from a variety of bows at a variety of ranges, and also against sword cuts and spear thrusts.

These linen layers were formed into a breast and backplate, and held together by shoulder straps that also protected the shoulder, and a skirt of flaps (*pteryges*) that protected the groin, hips, buttocks and, depending on length, the upper

thigh.

The linen cuirass was an improvement over the bronze cuirass in many ways. It was cheaper to make, using more widely available linen than expensive bronze. As anyone who has tried their hand at smithing will tell you, it's incredibly skilled work, and easy to mess up. Gluing sheets of linen together is much easier to do. The linen cuirass would also have been lighter and more comfortable to wear on account of its flexibility. The finished armor is fairly rigid, but it's still more bendable than bronze, and therefore less likely to chafe skin or dig into bone and muscle. This may seem like a minor point for warriors going into battle, but keep in mind that armor was frequently worn for long periods, often in hot weather, or rain, or on long marches, or during sieges. As any reenactor can tell you, armor comfort becomes critical very quickly, as all those minor rubbing edges add up quickly to intense fatigue and reduced combat capability. Linen is also less likely to heat up than metal under the hot sun, and even several glued layers have some breathability. Professor Aldrete also demonstrated that linen cuirasses can be waterproofed easily by rubbing them down with beeswax, something ancient armies had ample access to.

Some artistic representations show what look like metal scales sewn or glued on for added protection. A leather-covered metal example of a *linothorax* was recovered from what is generally accepted to be the tomb of Philip II, but a single example buried with the leader of a nation can't be considered representative of what was used by lower ranking officers and common soldiers.

Who in the phalanx actually wore the linen cuirass is itself a subject of debate. One of our best sources for 2nd century phalanxes is the Military Decree of Amphipolis, a tiny bit of writing on two marble blocks that lays out rules for the Macedonian army possibly under Philip V. These rules threaten a fine of two *drachmai*, possibly half of a day's wages for an officer, for being without a cuirass. The fine is directed at the *hēgēmones*, which literally translates to "leaders," but some scholars believe this title was applied to every soldier in the front rank of the phalanx by the time of Philip V. If that's the case, then the inscription may mean that only the front rank of the phalanx wore body armor. This is unlikely. The linen cuirass was easy and cheap enough to produce, and Hellenistic commanders understood that casualties could make rear rankers into front rankers very quickly. It's likely that the rank and file Hellenistic phalangites wore the linen cuirass, with the officers wearing the bronze.

There's evidence to support this in the Decree, which doesn't specifically mention the linen cuirass. Instead, it states the fine for the *thorax* (cuirass) and a reduced fine of one *drachma* for being without the *hemithorakion* (half-cuirass). This possibly indicates that officers only wore the bronze cuirass, while everyone else wore the linen cuirass, or possibly no body armor at all. Again, it's unlikely that phalangites went without body armor, and almost all surviving depictions of phalangites in art show them wearing body armor, as do numerous references in the ancient literature.

There's a lot of evidence that ancient military hierarchies used visible

indicators, such as finer, more highly decorated armor, to designate rank. Modern militaries still do this. There was a lot more gold on my officer's uniform than on that of my enlisted sailors even though they were the ones that did the real work and made the unit effective. Remember that ancient militaries did not, by and large, separate dress and operational uniforms the way that modern militaries do. It is easy to picture rank and file soldiers in plain linen cuirasses, with an officer with a bronze muscled cuirass on the right of the line.

Bronze greaves (*knēmides*) were clearly worn, and several survive to this day, but there are also many representations of phalangites without them, though in some cases this might be cavalrymen, who usually didn't wear them. The Amphipolis Decree fines common soldiers for not having greaves, so clearly they were required to wear them. Were they restricted to the *hēgemones*, as the linen cuirass possibly was? Again, this is unlikely. Casualties meant that any phalangite anywhere in the phalanx could find himself having to step up if the man in front of him was killed. Hence, everyone would need body armor.

We do know that classical hoplites probably wore their greaves on their bare lower legs, in a "clip-on" style, with an opening in the back that allowed the metal to flex so the greave could be slipped on. Surviving examples of these greaves have punch-holes for attaching a layer of felt padding. But we also see examples of "strap-on" greaves that were worn over boots or leggings, and strapped in place. The "clip-on" greaves are usually more refined, sometimes matching the leg's anatomy in the same way the "muscled" bronze cuirass does. This requires a great deal more skill to manufacture, and would have made them correspondingly more expensive, so it's more likely that state-issued greaves were of the "strap-on" variety, which look more like the simple, straight shin-guards we see modern hockey players wear. It's possible that officers wore fancier greaves than common soldiers, or that officers wore greaves and common soldiers just their high boots, which provided some protection for the shin. While the Amphipolis Decree appears to contradict this, it is only a snapshot in time, and regulations may have differed in earlier or later periods, or between disparate units.

We're on firm ground for the *peltē*, as pieces of some have survived and they correspond well with the literary evidence. The 1st century BC Greek tactical writer Asclepiodotus describes the shields as being 8 palms wide and only slightly concave, as opposed to the bowl-shaped *aspis*. The surviving *peltai* back this up, giving us a slightly concave shield around 2 feet across. These were probably made of wood and likely bronze-faced, which lent the name *Chalkaspides*, "Bronze Shields," to one of the corps in the Antigonid phalanx.

These shields were designed to be strapped to the forearm, and couldn't be hung off the shoulder as with the *aspis*, because they lacked the bowl shape and offset rim. Plutarch's *Life of Cleomenes* describes the Spartans fighting "like the Macedonians," using two-handed pikes and carrying the shield by its *ochanē*, a strap which hung around the shoulder and neck. Students of military history might be familiar with the *guige*, a leather strap that served the same function in

the Middle Ages. While lighter than the *aspis*, *peltai* were still plenty heavy, and some historians think the strap was used to hold the shield's weight off the phalangite's shoulders, while the arm loop (like the *porpax* of the *aspis*) gave the phalangite the ability to both move it and brace it when it was struck. Plutarch backs this up in his description of the phalangites at Pydna slinging their shields down from their shoulders into the ready position in front of them. Some reenactors have experimented with the *ochanē* being held in the hand between the pike shaft and the palm, or looped over the knuckles or around the wrist. But the truth is probably that each individual phalangite wrapped his *ochanē* as he liked best, possibly to "choke up" on his pike's angle of attack or to relieve a tired arm.

These shields were highly decorated. Surviving examples have concentric Cs and dots embossed into the bronze, which matches other examples in paintings and on coins. Others have Greek letters, usually a monogram for the king, or the Macedonian sunburst known as the "Vergina sun." Others have the heads of gods, heroes or kings. Shields were also likely painted in bright colors at times, though we don't have surviving examples to prove this.

Multiple sources tell us of specific units in the phalanx named for the color of their shields. We've already met the *Chalkaspides*, but we also read of *Leukaspides*, "White Shields," in the Antigonid army, and *Chrysaspides*, "Gold Shields," in the army of the Seleucids, another successor dynasty. Alexander the Great had a unit of *Argyraspides*, "Silver Shields" – reorganized and renamed from the elite *hypaspistai* – "shieldbearers." Alexander's Silver Shields were elite infantry under the command of his famous officer Nicanor, but they were broken up and disbanded due to their increasingly political role in the wars of the successors, and their willingness to betray their commanders in their own interest. The Seleucids revived them, employing an elite unit of Silver Shields at the Battle of Magnesia in 190 BC. In all these cases, the unit's name was likely derived from the color of their shields. In the cases of the metal names, it probably refers to a thin layer attached to the shield's face, or possibly to a painted color.

We're not sure what the different colors of these shields meant, if anything. Whether they indicated rank, or were just a way of telling one unit from another, is unclear. But we do have some evidence that indicated the quality of the troops. We know that the Antigonid phalanxes consisted of a Bronze Shield and White Shield corps. Plutarch talks about the Spartan king, Cleomenes III, throwing his worst troops (freed slaves or serfs) at the White Shields. This may indicate that the White Shields were composed of worse troops than the Bronze Shields. This is supported by a line from the annals of the turn of the 3rd century BC Roman poet Ennius. Writing about Philip V leading his phalanx into battle at Cynoscephalae in 197 BC, he describes the soldiers as "... wearing badges, chosen men, strong to bear war well." We know that Philip led the right of his phalanx forward, and these were likely the men in the honored position, as ancient armies tended to station the best troops to the right of the battle line. If these were his Bronze Shields, and they probably were, then we know they were considered

“chosen men” and complimented for their fighting virtue – more evidence to indicate that the Bronze Shields were a superior corps.

Some scholars speculate that the White Shields weren’t phalangites at all, but rather *thureophoroi*, a kind of medium infantry who used the *thureos*, a large oval shield with a central reinforcing spine and a central boss, and who fought with hoplite-style spears and javelins. This makes little sense when you consider that the ancient sources indicate that the White Shields were fighting as a phalanx. Phalangites in this period, as we’ve seen, used the *peltē*.

The Men of the Phalanx

Recruitment

There are many competing theories as to how soldiers were recruited for the Hellenistic phalanx. One piece of solid archaeological evidence is the *diagramma* of Philip V, a bit of faded and incomplete writing on a couple of stone blocks found in 1950 and 1980. The writing gives some clues as to how men were recruited for the army; however, when we cross-check it against Livy and Polybius a frustratingly unclear picture emerges.

We know that each *oikos* (household) was liable to provide one military-aged male for service. We know that in Hellenistic kingdoms, particularly in Macedon, phalangites were recruited primarily from peasant stock, people with small family farms. The preferred military age was from 20 to 45 years, but in a crisis, the age was expanded to 15–55. The *diagramma* is definitely a crisis document, as Philip V was attempting to muster troops in the face of a Roman invasion. However, Philip V understood that small farms were the lifeblood of his kingdom, and he took care to make sure that households only sent a family member to serve if there was at least one adult male left to take care of farm and family. The expanded age ranges, 15–20 and 45–55, were only mustered for service if the household had no one else who could answer the call. Even if the very young and the very old weren’t required to muster for active duty, they were still enrolled in a corps of reservists with defensive duties, the *boēthos*. The *boēthoi* would be called on to garrison towns and forts in the event of an invasion.

Livy tells us that after the fall of Macedon, the Romans took the leading Macedonians as hostages, each accompanied by all their male children over the age of 15, which backs up the *diagramma*, and shows the Romans taking care to make sure that any potential opposition was dealt with. Livy also tells us of “young citizens” (*iuventutem*) garrisoning the city of Cassandrea against the Romans during the Third Macedonian War, which may be a reference to these reservists.

Organization

The sources on the organization of the phalanx are confused, fragmentary and

hotly debated. For each of the titles for both units and their officers, there are usually two or three alternate titles, even in the ancient sources. I'm picking the one I like best and sticking to it. I'm also grossly simplifying, and not going into detail on commands, fighting stance, maneuvers, or a host of other fragments of information we have on the Hellenistic phalanx. That alone is the topic of multiple books, and this one is interested in giving you the working knowledge you need to appreciate it when the phalanx clashed with the legion.

One more note: the phalanxes that fought the Romans are all *post-Alexander the Great*. This is important to keep in mind, since one of our best sources, the turn of the 1st century AD Greek historian, philosopher and warrior Arrian, gives us relevant details of the phalanxes under Alexander. These details provide a great foundation, but things changed in the more than 40 years between Alexander's death and the first battle we will examine in this book.

Below, I'm going to use a lot of modern military terminology. I do this for two reasons. First, I want to help former and current service members grasp reference points in ancient armies, and secondly I also want to help students of modern military history dip their toes into the ancient world. For those who haven't served, or aren't familiar with modern military terminology, I beg your patience.

Where I use them, comparisons to modern American ranks and units are not 1-to-1, but it's important to consider them because of a military concept known as "span-of-control." Span-of-control refers to the level of authority/skill required by a particular officer based on the number of personnel they need to lead or the complexity of the mission they're confronted with. The challenges inherent in soldiers are universal, regardless of time period (people, after all, are people), and the responsibility and authority necessary to command them doesn't change all that much.

Confused as our sources are, we can figure out a few things. Asclepiodotus and the 2nd century AD Greek military writer Aelian both give us the smallest unit in the Hellenistic phalanx as the *lochos*, a file of 16 men. This would put the *lochos* somewhere between the squad and the platoon in the modern American army.

The *lochos* was led by a *lochagos*, and had two other officers: an *ouragos* (file-closer, in the last position in the file) and a *dimoiritēs* (half-file leader). There were also possibly enomotarchs (quarter-file leaders), though this is disputed. Asclepiodotus goes on to tell us that each man in the file was either a *protostatēs* (guy in front – in the odd numbered positions counting from the front of the file) or an *epistatēs* (guy behind – in the even numbered positions counting from the front of the file).

The *diagramma* also talks about a *pyrokaussis* (fire-burn), which is likely slang for "campfire," referring to the shared campfire that the *lochos* would sit around presumably to cook their meals. A man recruited in the *diagramma* would be assigned to the "campfire" of their *lochos*, and those 15 other men would be their battle-brothers for as long as they toiled in the phalanx.

Anyone who has served in the military knows it's a jargon-rich environment,

and this glimpse at possible military slang allows us to imagine what the experience of getting called up might have been like. Since much recruitment was local and regional, it's likely that men from the same campfire knew one another, maybe by name. So I imagine the conversation going something like: "Hey, Bilos, heard you got called up." "Yeah, looks like I'll be sitting at 'Theoxenos' campfire." "Oh, good! Theoxenos is a great guy. He'll take good care of you." This would certainly echo the kinds of conversations any modern service member has heard many times. The experience of soldiering is, in many ways, universal and timeless.

The Military Decree of Amphipolis talks about officers called *tetrarchai* (or tetrarchs, leaders of four). This has led some historians to suggest that four *lochoi* made up the *tetrarchia* of 64 men. This is the rough equivalent of a small company (or a giant platoon) in the modern American military. American companies are usually commanded by a captain, a mid-ranking officer, and it seems likely this was the *tetrarchēs*.

In ancient armies, the right-hand position was usually considered the place of honor. Some historians believe this is because of the phalanx's tendency to slide to the right during battle as we saw above. But, given this knowledge, it is likely that the right-hand or "first" *lochos* would have been where the *tetrarchēs* was positioned.

The Decree also mentions *speirarchai*, leaders of the *speirai*, and we see that word used in some of the ancient literary sources, like Polybius. Some historians see a "rule-of-four" established by the *lochos* (because we saw four *lochoi* to a *tetrarchia*) and assign four *tetrarchiai* to a *speira*, for a total of 256 men, which would make it the equivalent of a tiny American battalion or a giant company; battalions today are usually led by a lieutenant colonel.

We know of the existence of a *chiliarchia*, or "thousand," which matches with the rule-of-four, if you assign four *speirai* to make up one of the *chiliarchiai* at 1,024 men (which is about the maximum size of a battalion), led by a *chiliarchēs*.

Four *chiliarchiai* would then make up the *stratēgia* of 4,096 men, which roughly approximates to a brigade.

Four *stratēgiai* give a total strength of 16,384. I like this extrapolation using the rule-of-four because it matches some of the ancient sources who tell us that this exact number is the ideal strength for a phalanx, and we see this approximate number mustered for some of the battles we are examining in this book. This would mean that the entire Hellenistic army put into the field for a battle like Cynoscephalae would be the rough equivalent of a division. These are considered fairly small units by modern standards. By way of example: I was assigned to Multi-National Division – Baghdad (MND-B) during my third tour in Iraq. This division-sized unit served as the headquarters element for military operations in the region around the capital. While a modern military division is under the command of a major general, the Hellenistic phalanx of 16,384 in this case, plus cavalry, artillery and light troops, would be commanded by the king himself.

Please note that I am omitting many of the alternate names (a *speira* could be known as a *syntagma*, a *stratēgos* might be called a *phalangarchēs*, or phalangarch) as well as many other unit divisions, such as the *taxis*, *merarchia* and *diphalangarchia*. My goal here is not to overwhelm you with unnecessary detail. Other books are available for those who want to dive deep on this. Rather, I'm trying to prepare you with the information you'll need to best imagine the battles described in later chapters.

Deployment

There is a lot of debate as to exactly how the phalanx deployed, but we have agreement from three of our main sources – Polybius, Asclepiodotus and Aelian – on an intermediate formation giving each man “2 cubits” (3 feet) of space to stand. Known as the *meson* or *pyknosis* – “compact” – this formation was considered not close, but also not loose. While poor nutrition can stunt growth, most modern people are surprised to find that ancient people were, by and large, the same size as we are now. Closer formations are mentioned by both Asclepiodotus and Arrian, but you have to bear in mind that a large man wearing all the gear described above takes up a lot of room. Add to this the room needed to block with his shield and stab with his pike, and anything less than 3 feet starts to look a little doubtful. Asclepiodotus talks of a *synaspismos* or “locked shields” formation and an *araiotaton* open-order formation, but neither is practical for combat. Open order provides too much space for the phalanx to deploy pikes effectively because it leaves too much space for an enemy to evade the sharp pike heads and charge in close. Reenactors have shown that this open order was likely used for marching. Reenactors have also shown that the locked-shields formation is so close that it makes it impossible to properly use the pike, which has to be held straight up; which means that it was a strictly defensive formation, if used at all. It's important to remember that the old hoplite shields were a foot larger in diameter, making it much easier to overlap them or hold them rim to rim. The smaller *peltē* made this impossible, and it is likely that there was roughly a foot between shields when the Hellenistic phalanx deployed in the intermediate order, which was probably the order used in battle. This may seem like a lot of space, but when you add all the armor and have ranks of leveled pikes, it becomes apparent there's a lot of material to get through before you can strike flesh.

From this, if we envision the approximately 16,000-man phalanx at Cynoscephalae we see a picture of 1,024 *lochoi* deployed 16 ranks deep. If we accept that each man gets 3 feet of space, this means the phalanx alone, not counting the skirmishers or the cavalry, covers a frontage of over half a mile. And this assumes that the phalanx is deployed as a single, unbroken unit. If the phalanx is deployed by *chiliarchia* with intervals between, as they were at Magnesia, the frontage could be even longer.

The first five ranks of this massive formation leveled their pikes, creating a thicket of sharp iron pike heads, with 5,120 of them in the “killing zone,” the

part you'd have to get through to close with the phalangite and kill him with a sword or 6–8-foot spear, five for each of the guys in the front rank. The soldiers in the next 11 ranks would incline their pikes at a 45-degree angle, and then the remaining soldiers would gradually incline up until the last man held his straight up. One pike every 3 feet may seem like a lot of space, but when you consider that you have 10,880 of them pointing up, you have roughly half the total trees in New York City's 843-acre Central Park. So many pikes were not 100 percent protection against missiles such as arrows or javelins, but a lot of incoming missiles would have hit the raised pikes as they arced down into the phalanx, and would have either been knocked off course with the sharp end not penetrating straight down, or had their speed reduced to the point where they did less or no damage.

The sight of a massed phalanx like this would have had a serious effect on enemy morale. Ancient warriors definitely thought about the visual impact of massed forces. The turn of the 4th century warrior and writer Xenophon notes that the Persians wore lifts in their shoes to appear taller and that one of the reasons the Persian king used a chariot was to get himself a little higher off the ground than anyone else. Our best source, Polybius, flat out says this of the Roman army:

... each man is decorated with a plume of feathers, with three purple or black feathers standing upright, about a cubit long. The effect of these being placed on the helmet, combined with the rest of the armor, is to give the man the appearance of being twice his real height, and to give him a noble aspect calculated to strike terror into the enemy.

So, we have some evidence that greater height was considered frightening. Many ancient armies deployed in great numbers, and many had similar amounts of metal armor and shields on display. Many had helmet crests that added height. But only the Hellenistic phalanx marched into battle with a forest of 16–21-foot pikes overhead. If height was a factor in sapping enemy morale, then confronting a phalanx must have turned the ancient fighting man's bowels to water. Plutarch puts these words into the mouth of the Roman commander Aemilius Paullus when he faced the Antigonid phalanx at Pydna: *"I have never seen anything so frightening."* Plutarch was writing over 250 years after the battle, and his goal was to make a moral point, not to accurately recount history, but we have no reason in this case to doubt him.

This isn't all that different today, where height is still considered intimidating. A good friend of mine, the Chief Executive Officer of a technology start-up, always wears stiletto heels to board meetings. "If you're taller," she tells me, "they are much more likely to listen to you." We get a glimpse of what a phalanx might have looked like in Oliver Stone's utter disaster of a film, the 2004 biopic *Alexander*. One of the film's sole redeeming values is that it gives us a view of a Hellenistic phalanx, and it's impressive. A formed phalanx, seen across a battlefield, would scare the hell out of anyone.

The phalanx would have been screened by skirmishers and had its flanks

covered by cavalry and possibly light troops. Regardless, the Hellenistic phalanx was no different than the classical hoplite phalanx. Those 16,000 men were facing forward. They could only fight in one direction. Changing facing may seem simple to the average person. If a phalanx got hit from the side or the rear, why couldn't the phalangites just turn and fight in a different direction? Remember, we're talking about 16,000 people, packed together and sweating under at least 40 pounds of gear. Even when they're trying to be quiet, that many people make a lot of noise and many have their ears covered by helmets. 16,000 people also kick up a lot of dust, and that's on a clear day. Any kind of reduced visibility would make it harder for anyone, especially the men behind the front line, trying to peer through a mass of pike shafts and helmets, over the tops of rank upon rank of shields to see what was going on. If an enemy made contact with the rear or flank of a phalanx, only those close to the point of contact would even notice, at first. Then, as officers shouted orders without the aid of a megaphone or radio, there would be mass confusion. Most wouldn't know which way to turn, and turning when you're carrying a 16–21-foot pike at any angle from straight up to parallel to the ground, raises a serious risk of tangling up with other pikes. That doesn't even count the risk of shield edges or swords catching. The Hellenistic phalanx, even more than the old hoplite phalanx, was a formation designed to deploy and then move as little as possible.

Remember, a phalanx lives and dies by its cohesion. It is only truly effective when it presents an unbroken line of pike heads and shields to the enemy. The moment gaps appear, the formation is at serious risk from an enemy who can close past the effective range of the pike head, and force the phalangite to fight with his sword. Further, the *peltē* is fine in the massed phalanx, but as an individual combat shield, it is small and easy to get around. With the phalangite's hand projecting past the rim, the forearm is left to control the blocking action of the shield, or to force the phalangite to "choke up" on his grip to get control of the shield with his left hand. This may seem simple, but you try it with a Roman legionary charging you.

While phalanxes could and did "wheel," it was a slow, torturous affair, and incredibly risky. Once deployed, the phalanx fought in a single direction – straight ahead, until either it, or the enemy, broke. Protecting the phalanx's vulnerable flanks and rear was absolutely imperative.

The *agēma*

Hellenistic armies of the period we're examining had a lot less troop diversity than those under Alexander the Great, but it's important to mention again that the phalanx wouldn't have marched alone. It would have been accompanied by cavalry squadrons, bands of skirmishers, artillery and even elephants. These units existed and participated in battles, but I'm deliberately not examining them here. This book is about the legion and the phalanx, specifically, and we'll confine our discussion of special units in this chapter to those who were also phalangites.

We've talked about the various types of "shields" present in the Hellenistic

phalanx, and examined how some, like the Silver Shields, are known to have been elite, while some, like the White Shields, were possibly inferior. Another unit worth examining is the *agēma*.

The word *agēma* means “vanguard,” or “the guys who go first.” It’s an old word that goes back to classical Greece, but Alexander the Great made it into a unit title, the “first” or lead unit in any corps. So, you could have an *agēma* of infantry, and an *agēma* of cavalry. Alexander even had an *agēma* of elephants. These *agēmata* appear prominently in the Antigonid army at Pydna, which we’ll see in chapter IX. Livy and Polybius both give descriptions of these elite soldiers, particularly in the parade of the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, at Daphne. Livy also mentions them in this description of a military review in 171 BC: *“Then there were two thousand in number selected from all the caetrati for their strength and for the vigor of their age: this unit they called the ‘agēma’, it had as commanders Leonnatos and Thrasippus the Euiestians. The other caetrati were about three thousand men, Antiphilus of Edessa was commander.”*

Livy is using the Latin word “*caetrati*” to describe men using the small, round Spanish shield called the *caetra*, in other words, the *peltē*. I gave an earlier example of word substitutions such as Gratius referring to a Persian cavalry spear when he really meant a Macedonian infantry pike. So, from this, we can deduce there may have been an elite corps of 5,000 “peltasts.” Remember, the phalangites themselves are all technically peltasts, since they’re carrying the *peltē*. Within this corps were 2,000 *agēma* soldiers, specifically chosen because they were young and fit. We’ll see the *agēma* in action as we explore the specific battles ahead.



III

MULES THAT KILL: UNDER THE EAGLE OF ROME

A sword never kills anyone. It is a tool in the hand of a killer.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Letter LXXXVII*

In his 2006 novel of Alexander the Great, *The Afghan Campaign*, Steven Pressfield famously called the Macedonian foot soldiers “Mules that kill.” I’ve always instinctively transferred that title to their Roman counterparts. During the period covered by this book, the Roman legionary typically carried at least 60 pounds of gear on the march, much of it non-combat related, a harbinger of modern professional armies where soldiers were expected to do more than fight.

This professionalism, resourcefulness, and downright grit marked the legion from its earliest days. The origin of the legion is shrouded in myth, rooted in the ancient armed forces serving with the 8th century BC semi-mythical Roman king Romulus. This earliest “regal” period of Rome’s history, so named because they had kings then, blended military service and political government, so that it was impossible to distinguish one from the other. Rome’s earliest government was built around three tribes, each broken into ten *curiae*. The root of the word *curia* comes from “a bunch of armed men.” Each tribe was commanded by a *tribunus militum*, and each *curia* gave 100 men (so, 1,000 from each tribe) to form an army. This 3,000-strong army was known as the *legio* from the Latin *legere* “to choose,” which simply meant “levy” or “the guys who got called up.”

We know very little of how this early legion fought, but the picture gets clearer in the 6th century BC, when we can be reasonably sure that the Romans began to fight as hoplites in the Greek fashion, probably learning of the practice via their Etruscan neighbors to the north. Diodorus tells us of the Romans using rectangular shields, and then learning to use round ones from their Etruscan neighbors.

The Roman king credited with bringing about this change is Servius Tullius, author of the famous “Servian reforms” of the 6th century, which transformed not only the Roman military, but the military-integrated political system as well. The Servian reforms grouped Romans by two wealth-based classes – the *classis*, who could afford the hoplite gear and could thus serve in the phalanx, and the *infra classem* who couldn’t afford it, and so served as light troops. This is debated,

with some scholars sticking closely to Livy, who describes six distinct classes, but I hold with other scholars who dispute this. The six classes described by Livy were political classes, with military service falling along the *classis/infra classem* line I've just described.

The legion was expanded during this period, growing to around 6,000 men, counted as 40 "centuries" (groups of 100) of hoplites and another 20 centuries of light troops. In the mid 4th century BC, Rome became a republic and began to be governed by two annually elected consuls, each in command of their own legion. The consuls each alternated in holding *imperium*, the power of military command, for a month.

The army had grown to four legions, two for each consul, by the late 4th century BC. Now, Polybius chimes in, giving us a specific breakdown for each legion: 3,000 heavy legionaries and 1,200 light troops. These four legions were numbered I–IV, and Pliny tells us that each marched under the eagle of Rome, but also under four other legionary standards: the wolf, the horse, the boar, and the minotaur (which back then was a bull with the head of a man, not a man with the head of a bull). Around this time, the Roman phalanx began to undergo a transformation that would see it abandon the spear and the hoplite shield and embrace a completely new way of fighting.

Why this shift, from the hoplite phalanx to the new organization we'll examine below, occurred is unclear. The best explanation I've heard thus far is that the Roman phalanx had a tough time operating on the steep and broken ground of Mount Gaurus, where the Romans took on the Italian tribe of the Samnites during the First Samnite War in 343 BC. Other scholars have suggested that it was the disastrous defeat of the Romans at the hands of the Senones, a tribe of Gauls led by the fierce chieftain Brennus, who went on to sack Rome in 390 BC. Ever heard the quote, "*Vae victis*" (woe to the vanquished)? Brennus supposedly said it when the Romans tried to plead with him.

Organization

The four legions in this new system were organized around the *manipulus* (handful), or "maniple," blocks of men divided into three classes that in turn formed three lines of ten maniples each, one behind the other.

In the first line were the *hastati* (spearmen – who, incidentally, didn't carry spears – the name is clearly a holdover from the phalanx days), younger and inexperienced warriors. Behind them came the *principes* (leaders), men in the prime of their lives, with more experience. Last were the *triarii* (guys in the third rank), who were all hardened veterans. There were two other classes of soldier in the army of the Roman Republic, the *velites* (fast movers) who fought as lightly armed skirmishers and the *equites* (horsemen) who served as cavalry, but we will not consider these unless it is relevant to the legion and how it faced the phalanx.

The *velites* weren't added as an official class in the Roman army until 211 BC, after the first three battles we will examine in this book. Prior to that, the

skirmishing role was carried out by similar troops known as the *leves* and *accensi*.

The legion was, at this time, a genuine seasonal levy, with the soldiers being called up for service and dismissed back to their farms after the conclusion of their duties. Each male between the ages of 17 and 46 with property valued at 11,000 *asses* (the plural for *as*, a copper coin; you could buy a loaf of bread for about two of them) or more were subject to the *dilectus*, where they were arranged by height and age and picked by the junior tribunes to serve in one of the four legions. The *tribuni* were roughly equivalent to a modern day colonel, which is a senior rank with high levels of responsibility, but still below that of general. Six *tribuni* served in each legion, four of whom were elected by the people. A legionary could be retained for up to 16 years, though most expected to be discharged after about six continuous years. After that, he was assigned to the reserves, liable for the *evocatus* (call-out), where he could be made to serve again up to his maximum of 16 years or campaigns.

Each of three classes of legionary (*hastati*, *principes* and *triarii*) had their own maniples. The exact number probably varied, but was usually around 120 soldiers per maniple for the first two lines of *hastati* and *principes*, and about half that for the maniples of *triarii*. Each maniple was made of two *centuriae*. The word is believed to come from *centum* – “one hundred,” but they were rarely at full strength, and usually numbered around 60–80 soldiers.

Each century was led by a *centurio*, or centurion, an officer roughly equivalent to a modern army captain. I want to take a moment here to counter the general belief that the centurion was the equivalent of a modern sergeant or other non-commissioned officer. I dispute this based on my understanding of span-of-control. People are people, and the challenges inherent in commanding 60–100 soldiers are universal. Regardless of time period, the responsibility and authority necessary to command them doesn't change all that much. The duties and authority of a centurion much more closely approximate to those of a captain than to those of a sergeant in the modern military. Senior centurions served on the commander's council, often conferring directly with the consul himself. Livy tells the story of the centurion Lucius Sicius Dentatus (the “dentatus” is a nickname, probably meaning “fanged,” in a nod to Lucius' wolf-like ferocity), who was promoted to the rank of tribune and eventually killed in an aristocratic plot to silence his advocacy for the rights of the common soldier.

Now, this is a sad story of a tragic end to a heroic figure, but it is also instructive. The fact that Lucius was able to become a tribune at all, and that aristocrats even noticed Lucius in a society as non-egalitarian as ancient Rome speaks to the centurion's more prominent role, and undermines the comparison to a modern non-commissioned officer. Further, the ancient sources show the centurion's staff such as the trumpeter, the watch commander and the standard bearer acting in the roles of non-commissioned officers – staff functions not usually thought of as a modern captain's job.

The centurion is most famous for two distinguishing features. The first was his helmet crest that ran side to side, instead of front to back, the *crista transversa*.

The second was his *vitis Latina*, the “vine rod” cut from a mature vine branch around 3 feet long. It was usually more or less straight and undecorated, but gnarled and knotty. This wasn’t a weak, green vine. Think of a tree branch, hard and strong. The vine rod was the symbol of the centurion’s authority over his soldiers, and in particular his authority to deliver corporal punishment, which he would often inflict using the rod, provided the transgressors were Roman citizens, among whom it was considered a point of pride to be punished by the rod and not some other means.

The centurion would appoint his own *optio*, who acted as the century’s second-in-command. The two centurions in a maniple were the *prior* and *posterior*, with the *prior* being the senior of the two, commanding the century on the right.

But here again fragmentary and confusing source information leads to debate. Even those who don’t know Latin can guess that the words *prior* and *posterior* mean “before” and “behind,” which has led some scholars to believe that the two centuries in a maniple deployed one behind the other, and not side by side.

Each centurion also had a small staff, including a *signifer* (standard-bearer), the *cornicen* (trumpeter) and the *tesserarius* (watch commander). All of these officers received extra pay and had additional duties. The standard-bearer carried the unit’s *signum*, a long pole decked out with *phalarae* – medallions that told the story of the unit’s honors – and sometimes topped with an open hand symbolizing the soldiers’ oath. He also acted as the unit’s banker, holding money on behalf of the legionaries and keeping a ledger accounting for it. The trumpeter also acted as a general assistant to the centurion.

Above the centurion was the tribune, and above him the *legatus* (legate), a Roman of senatorial rank who usually commanded one of the two legions under each consul.

The legionaries deployed much farther apart than the phalangites. Polybius explains why:

... a Roman soldier in full armor also requires a space of three square feet. But as their method of fighting admits of individual motion for each man – because he defends his body with a shield, which he moves about to any point from which a blow is coming, and because he uses his sword both for cutting and thrusting – it is evident that each man must have a clear space, and an interval of at least three feet both on flank and rear, if he is to do his duty with any effect.

It’s important to remember this, because it means that fewer soldiers cover more frontage, which reduces the likelihood that the line will be enveloped.

The three lines deployed staggered. There would be a gap between each maniple, wide enough to accommodate another maniple. The second line would cover the gaps between the first. Seen from above, the three lines would look vaguely like a checkerboard, leading modern scholars to give the formation the name *quincunx*, after the five dots on one face of a six-sided die.

Quincunx is a modern term, and we’re reasonably sure the ancients never used it. Modern scholars also use the term *triplex acies* to refer to this arrangement of three staggered lines. Livy calls it the *agmen quadratum*, “arrangement of squares” – though this may also refer to a hollow square formation with the

baggage in the middle. It's hotly debated precisely how this formation worked, and how the gaps functioned, but there's one theory that makes the most sense: The legion advanced with the skirmishers out front, throwing javelins to soften up the enemy battle line. Once they had exhausted their missiles, or when the two battle lines were nearing impact, they would run back through the gaps and set up with the smaller maniples of the *triarii* in the back. The enemy would have to fight through the *hastati* and the *principes* to reach the *triarii*, an event that was considered so unlikely it gave rise to an expression: *ad triarios redisse*, or "it has come down to the *triarii*," another way of saying, "man, we are truly screwed now."

Yes, the gaps between the maniples exposed their flanks, but keep in mind that any enemy exploiting these gaps would have to turn their own flank to the maniples of the next line, and given the way the lines were ordered, the troops became more veteran and better equipped the further back you went. You charge through the gap and attack the exposed flank of a maniple of *hastati*. You have just turned your own flank to a maniple of *principes*, men in their prime with more experience and better equipment than the *hastati*. Who would be crazy enough to risk that? Added to this is the individual legionary's ability to fight independently, which we'll talk more about later. Suffice to say that a soldier armed with a 2-foot sword can turn to face an enemy a lot more easily than a soldier armed with a 21-foot pike.

The first line would throw their javelins, then rush to engage the enemy with their swords, fighting until wounds or exhaustion forced them to retire through the *principes*, who would step up and repeat the process. This makes more sense when you consider the arms and equipment of each legionary.

I am describing the "Polybian" legions discussed in this book. Earlier legions may have had more maniples, and probably included other troop types as well. I am also deliberately leaving out Marcus Furius Camillus, the turn of the 4th century BC Roman hero hailed as Rome's "second founder." Modern scholars often credit him with major reforms to the legion, but this is disputed and based on thin evidence.

The *socii*

Nearly all ancient armies made use of allied troops, but Rome had a unique system of alliances that governed the organization and deployment of their "allies." I use quotes there because the Roman "allies" were frequently not the kind of ally you'd think of in a modern sense. Canada is an ally of the United States, and while they have an inarguably less powerful military, nobody would consider them a subordinate to the United States.

But that was certainly the case in the ancient world. Being a friend and ally of Rome usually came after Rome had defeated you on the battlefield, after which you'd be incorporated into a system of alliances that made you one of Rome's *socii* (partners). These alliances were primarily military, horribly unequal, and persisted

until the Social War in the early 1st century BC granted many of them Roman citizenship and saw their lands fully absorbed into the Republic.

It usually worked like this: Rome would beat up a neighboring tribe, annex some of its territory, and settle a bunch of Romans on it, who voluntarily gave up their citizenship and became Roman allies. The defeated tribe would then swear perpetual friendship to Rome, knowing they had a bunch of Roman colonists there to keep an eye on them. These “allies” were often reluctant, and there was always the constant risk, at least in the early days of the Republic, that they would defect to Rome’s enemies, as we will see during the Pyrrhic War. This risk was gradually mitigated as Roman *socii* realized the benefits of allegiance to Rome (and the horrible cost of defiance).

Roman allies were expected to provide troops in time of war, and were usually allowed a share in the plunder. Most didn’t pay further tribute, and were permitted to govern themselves, provided that they didn’t make trouble, and contributed the required number of soldiers when told. It may seem fairly lenient, and it was, but it definitely rankled. Ancient people were touchy about honor, the perception of their own military strength and being perceived as able to manage their own affairs. The Romans forced the vast majority of their allies “*in fidem populi Romani se dedere*” – to officially seek the protection of the Roman people’s honor. Such allies were considered *dediticii*, from the Latin *deditio*, which sounds to English-speakers like “dedication,” but is actually much closer to “surrender.” All allies had to provide Rome with a list of grown men, known as the *formula togatorum*, which would be used to determine their service obligations.

Allies were of two main statuses: the *socii Latini* (allies of the Latin status) and everyone else. The allies of the Latin status were those who mostly, but not always, belonged to original tribes of the Latins, Rome’s immediate neighbors and the first to be subjugated and forced to become *dediticii*. At any given moment, some of the “Latin” allies might be actual Romans who had willingly become allies of the Latin status to get a fresh start on new land. It wasn’t that much of a loss. Certainly, allies couldn’t dictate Roman foreign policy or have a hand in making laws, and their options for political advancement would be limited if they wanted to tackle the *cursus honorum* – the succession of public offices that a Roman was expected to hold before becoming consul, the highest office. But otherwise, allies could pretty much do as they liked – speaking their own language, minting their own coins, running their own affairs. The military burden may seem high to a modern reader, but in the ancient world, and particularly in the Roman world, military service was the surest ticket to high social status, and sometimes to great wealth. The fact that the population of Roman adult males eligible for military service was about 50 percent that of their allies, and that Roman citizens still made up 50 percent of the army, may be an indicator that many wanted to serve. It may be that many Roman allies saw the chance to serve beside the legions as an opportunity rather than a hardship. This might also explain why, even after the utter disaster at Cannae in 216 BC, where

the Roman army was effectively wiped out, most of the Roman allies did not defect to the Carthaginian victor, the famous general Hannibal Barca. Cannae took place nearly 60 years after the Epirote king Pyrrhus was finally defeated by Rome, despite being supported by numerous *socii* defectors, and clearly the intervening years hadn't warmed them to trying to defy Rome a second time.

Roman allies fought in their own units, which made sense when you consider the possibility that they may have spoken their own dialect, if not an entirely different language to that of the Romans, not to mention the cultural differences. The allies were under the command of Roman officers called *praefecti sociorum* (prefects of the allies). Below this rank, the allies served under their own officers, which ensured that while they executed the strategic vision of the Roman leadership, they served directly under men they knew and trusted.

The allied units were usually placed on the wings of the battle line, with the citizen legionaries holding the center, and so were referred to as *alae* (wings). An individual wing usually had as many infantry as a single legion, and made up a much higher proportion of the legionary cavalry – around a 3-to-1 ratio of allies to Roman citizens.

Polybius tells us that about a fifth of the allied infantry and a third of the cavalry were tapped to serve as *extraordinarii* (the extraordinary ones). These troops were picked for their suitability, and were considered elite. They camped right beside the consul's tent, and were often used for high-risk, important duties such as the vanguard or rearguard on a march, or for reconnaissance.

We don't have great information on how the Roman allies fought, but we do see in the Roman decision to let them serve under their own officers, and in the very light hand in governing the lives of their allies, the suggestion that they may have been armed and equipped in their native style. Does this mean that Roman allies necessarily *didn't* fight in the same style as a Roman legionary? It's impossible to be sure. There is some evidence that they were armed and trained as legionaries, but we can't assume that was always the case. If they did fight in the style of their own people, then some of them may have fought as hoplites, or *thureophoroi* given the strong Greek influence across the Italian peninsula, or in warbands (more or less disorganized blocks of warriors armed with long slashing weapons, who prized individual heroism over disciplined formed fighting), given the tremendous Celtic influence over the same territory.

Weapons

When we talk about the weapons and armor of the turn of the 3rd century BC Roman legionary, we have to remember the “I don't know” rule. The sources are contradictory and vague here. I am giving my best interpretation below, but there are lots of holes. For example, it's generally believed that the legionary was first and foremost a swordsman, but the 1st century BC Greek historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus mentions that the old hoplite spear was still being used by the *principes* during the first three battles we'll be examining in this book. The *hastati*

and *principes* are usually assumed to have used the *pilum* (javelin), but Livy doesn't mention them at all, and we don't even hear about them until around 293 BC during the Third Samnite War, which is only 13 years before the Battle of Heraclea, the first battle we're going to look at in this book.

What does all this mean? As with the transition from the classical hoplite phalanx to the pike-wielding phalanx of foot companions, it's likely that weapons were introduced gradually, and that there was a kind of hybrid legion in transition during this period – moving slowly away from the hoplite model we saw under the Servian reforms and into the *triplex acies* that was used against Carthage. However, for purposes of this book, I am going to present the legion as it's generally thought of in the republican period beginning in roughly 509 BC and running until the reforms of Gaius Marius in 107 BC.

Javelins

Each *hastatus* and *princeps* was armed with two *pila* (javelins), one thick and one thin according to Polybius. Both were like shorter, lighter spears, around 6 feet long and weighing about 5–10 pounds. The heavy, pointed, iron head was about a quarter-inch in diameter and at the end of a 2-foot, skinny iron neck. This is important, because that thin bit of iron often bent on impact, making the javelin useless for throwing back. Even better, the javelin might bend while stuck in an enemy shield. This would suddenly add 5–10 pounds of weight to the shield and force the enemy to choose between fatigue (if he kept the shield) and defense (if he dropped it).

But the javelin's primary goal was to kill or wound the enemy, and it was well made to do just that. The weight was concentrated behind that small iron head, shaped like a pyramid, which gave it incredible armor-piercing power. Striking at a good angle, it could pierce a helmet, or a shield and the arm behind it. Javelins were thrown at a distance of around 50 feet, first the heavy, then the light; then the legionaries would draw their swords and close.

Keep in mind that a legion is generally thought to have ten maniples in the front line. If we make the conservative estimate of 120 legionaries per maniple, that means 1,200 javelins are going into the air, arcing toward the enemy, followed by another 1,200 shortly afterward. These javelins are breaking kneecaps, punching through throats, pinning forearms to shields. The enemy would be screaming, cursing, collapsing or throwing down their shields.

And right then, when their confusion, fear and pain was at its height, the legionaries charged and the engagement turned into a knife-fight.

Sword

The legionary's sword was the famed *gladius*, we believe roughly 2 feet of steel. Ancient metallurgy isn't well understood, but the Romans smelted their iron in furnaces that produced "blooms" of "sponge iron" which were then wrought to extract more impurities. The result was a kind of uneven steel which wouldn't

pass muster by modern standards, but which we also can't rightfully just call plain iron. This "blister steel" was uneven, and the weapons produced were probably of differing quality. If the smith got the carbon content just right, it would be hard, but flexible, and would hold an edge well. If the carbon content was too high, it would be brittle. Too low, it would be soft and dull easily. Swords that had the right carbon content were likely treasured, handed down from generation to generation. With no way to standardize the process of smelting metal, and no way to regulate carbon content, you couldn't really tell the quality of your sword until you put it to use, except in extreme cases. It's probable that many ancient warriors, whether they were carrying a *xiphos* or a *gladius*, found their blades would shatter on impact, or bend, or that they would have to spend hours sharpening them as they couldn't seem to hold an edge. It's possible to determine carbon content in metal by running the metal against a grinding wheel and observing the character of the sparks, but the first documented use of this method was in the beginning of the 20th century AD.

Regardless of the metal content, these swords were serviceable enough, and soon earned a fearsome reputation. Livy has a great passage describing the reaction of the Antigonid troops under Philip V seeing the wounds made by the Roman sword:

... for men who had seen the wounds made by javelins and arrows and occasionally by lances, since they were used to fighting with the Greeks and Illyrians, when they had seen bodies chopped to pieces by the Spanish sword, arms torn away, shoulders and all, or heads separated from bodies, with the necks completely severed, or vitals laid open, and the other fearful wounds, realized in a general panic with what weapons and what men they had to fight.

Livy calls it the "Spanish sword." That's not a mistake. It was widely known as the *gladius Hispaniensis*, and once again, we're not entirely sure why. Scholars agree that it was adapted from the Iberians (ancient Spanish), though they debate whether it was brought into general service during the First or Second Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage. It's an important debate, because the two conflicts took place nearly a quarter-century apart, and so much of Roman military doctrine centers around this weapon.

The sword used by the Roman legionary was straight, with sharp edges and a point that enabled both cutting and thrusting. But while Polybius confirms that it was used for both, he agrees with the late 4th century AD Roman writer Vegetius that Roman soldiers much preferred the thrust to the slash, because it was more lethal. This was also likely an outgrowth of the design of the *scutum*, the shield used by the legionaries.

Spear

We have very little information on the *hasta* (spear), other than that it was restricted to the *triarii*, who used it in the style of the old classical phalanx, to deliver shock combat in the unlikely event the first two lines were broken. Likewise, these spears could be planted to receive a charge. Almost nothing

specific is known of the *triarius'* spear, and so we must follow Occam's Razor here: in the absence of additional data, the simplest answer is the correct one. The simplest answer is this: since they originally fought as hoplites, the *triarii* preserved the original model of spear and went on using it. This would make the *triarius'* spear much the same as we've already seen: likely made of ash wood, blister-steel-tipped spear around 8 feet long and with a bronze "lizard-killer" butt-spike.

Armor

Perhaps the least ideal condition would be an enemy attack getting past the shield and striking the legionary, and of course that's exactly what happened all the time.

To mitigate this, the legionary was equipped with a good set of armor. Keep in mind the wealth-based class system that governed the Roman army. Soldiers were expected to provide their own gear, and their role in the army was based partly on their ability to supply the required equipment.

Helmet

We know that Roman legionaries wore helmets, and several excellent examples survive. Their specific origins aren't well known, but some scholars believe that, like the phalanx, they are based on Greek innovations that came to the Romans from their Etruscan neighbors to the north. Others think that some patterns of helmet reached the Romans through their Celtic neighbors. The helmets then evolved to suit the style of their Roman users.

Most modern representations of Roman soldiers show the *hastati* and *principes* wearing the Montefortino-type helmet and the *triarii* wearing the Pseudo-Corinthian, but there is no evidence in the sources to support this, and it's likely that much greater helmet diversity existed in the ranks.

The Montefortino type is a simple round or slightly conical bronze cap, usually tapering toward a knob that could be used to attach a plume. It sometimes had cheek pieces, though few surviving helmets still have them attached. It had a slight flaring brim that, counterintuitively, covered the back of the neck rather than shading the eyes. The brim could be decorated, sometimes with stylized ropework or other lines.

The Pseudo-Corinthian helmet looks a lot like the old Greek Corinthian helmet we discussed above, but the nose protection and eye holes have all shrunk to a purely decorative size, and now sit high up on the forehead. This also frequently had cheek pieces, a flaring brim and at least one plume holder. Both types left the soldier's face completely open, providing maximum vision and breathing room, and allowing heat to dissipate. As with the iron-rimmed shields, this hints that the Romans were most concerned with downward strokes, probably from swords, clubs or axes.

As I quoted in chapter II, Polybius tells us that Romans wore plumes on their helmets. He tells us that they were made of feathers, how many were used, how long they were and even what colors were used. He also tells us why they used crests – because it made the soldier look taller, and greater height was believed to frighten the enemy and weaken his resolve. If you take the conservative estimate of 120 soldiers in a maniple of *hastati*, an enemy would see a waving field of 3,600 dark feathers, which would make the enemy seem not only taller, but more numerous as well.

Body armor

We know from both material record and literary sources that Roman legionaries wore body armor. The most famous Roman armor, the *lorica segmentata* that I mentioned in chapter I, was over a century in the future from the Romans we’re discussing in this book. Legionaries of this period wore a bronze pectoral to protect the heart. These could be simple, little more than a bronze square held on with leather straps, but some were beautifully worked, the most famous being the gilded bronze trilobate (three-lobed) example currently in the Musée National de Bardo in Tunisia, which is gorgeously embossed with the head of the Roman goddess Minerva.

Wealthier soldiers would have worn the *lorica hamata*, a version of the *linothorax* made from mail – a series of interlocking metal rings that essentially fit and moved like cloth. Like the linen cuirass, this mail “shirt” had shoulder flaps that held the armor together and provided protection to the shoulders. This mail armor hung to about mid-thigh, and left the arms completely bare. Later versions had sleeves and hung lower, but these innovations didn’t appear until after the period we’re discussing here. The mail was heavier than the pectoral, but provided better protection. It was also highly flexible, only slightly less flexible than cloth, and breathed as well as the cloth garment worn underneath it.

The “muscle” cuirass we described above was also in use, and like the phalanx would have likely been worn by wealthier citizens and officers.

Greaves

Both Polybius and Arrian agree that legionaries wore only one greave, on their left leg. This gives us a hint as to how the legionary would have advanced and positioned their body in a battle – left leg forward, body slightly turned to take cover behind the big shield. However, we also have numerous depictions in art that show Roman soldiers wearing two greaves, so again, we can’t take this as gospel truth. Livy, speaking about the legionaries of the Servian reforms, uses the Latin *ocrae*, which is plural, but he is also referring to a much earlier legionary. Remember that the earliest Roman legionaries were armed as hoplites, who we know wore two greaves.

Roman greaves don’t appear all that different from the ones we’ve already

examined, ranging in style from fine anatomical representations, to simple bronze shin-guards. The use here is obvious. The legionary's leading leg (at least) would be covered from the waist down to the knee by the lower half of the shield, and any errant blows that skipped down the shield's face, or low thrusts that went beneath the shield, would be caught by the greave.

Shield

Polybius offers a fairly specific description of the legionary's shield, or *scutum*:

... a large shield, the surface of which is curved outwards, its width two and a half feet, its length four feet – though there is also a larger shield in which these measures are increased by a palm's breadth. It consists of two layers of wood fastened together with bull's-hide glue, the outer surface of which is first covered with canvas, then with calf's skin; on the upper and lower edges it is bound with iron to resist the downward strokes of the sword, and the wear of resting upon the ground. Upon it also is fixed an iron boss, to resist the more formidable blows of stones and pikes, and of heavy missiles generally.

There are a few things to point out about Polybius' description. First, note that he mentions the iron edges designed to "resist the downward strokes of the sword." Consider Brennus' defeat of the Romans in 390 BC and his subsequent sack of Rome. This horrible defeat must have lingered in Roman memory, and made a strong impression on their tradition of arms. The Celts are known to have used long, slashing swords, and here again we see a possible hint of why the legionary's equipment evolved from the hoplite-style gear we know he carried when Rome was still ruled by kings. Think about the round shape of the hoplite shield. Unless a downward stroke from a sword is caught at the exact center of the top edge, it's likely to continue traveling downward along the sloping edge and into the wielder's body. Now, picture the relatively flat top of the *scutum*, bound with iron, as Polybius describes. This surface would be far more likely to make the blade bounce off, or possibly break, without striking the legionary.

Recall both Polybius' and Vegetius' insistence that Romans preferred to thrust with their swords. Now, consider the big shield that Polybius describes. It has an iron boss (*umbo*) in the center, protecting the legionary's hand and essentially giving him a giant metal boxing glove. The shield itself was heavy, probably over 20 pounds, and while lugging that weight is tiring, it was also an effective weapon once it got moving.

The picture that emerges is this: the legionary throws his javelins, then charges to close with the enemy so he can use his 2-foot sword. If he's fighting against a chopping/slashing weapon like a sword, he catches his enemy's blows on the edge of his giant shield. If he's fighting against a thrusting weapon like a spear, he turns it aside with the shield's face. He punches his enemy with his giant shield, throwing him off balance, or maybe even wounding him. Now, in close, he thrusts his sword into his enemy's gut or face, and brings him down. Roman historical reenactors (there are many passionate communities around the world, but perhaps the most famous is Britain's Ermine Street Guard, who've been

leading the way for 45 years) have confirmed some of the tactics described above, and I'm confident it is an accurate reckoning of how legionaries conducted their brutal business under ideal conditions.

Of course, in war, conditions are seldom ideal.



The systems of conscription and the types of equipment used in the legion and phalanx were unique outgrowths of their respective cultures, and heavily influenced by Roman and Hellenistic positions in the world, their relationships with their neighbors, and the impact of military experiences that unfolded over centuries. These influences resulted in two disparate heavy infantry formations, organized and equipped very differently. It's a fascinating test bed, and in looking at how they clashed, we are looking at a conflict not only between technologies and military organizations but also between cultures. In diving into the six battles we'll examine below, we will witness the struggle not just for supremacy over the Mediterranean ancient world, but to determine the legacy of warfare in our own societies.

PART II

FIGHT! THE LEGION VERSUS THE PHALANX IN SIX BATTLES



LIVY, *HISTORY OF ROME*:

In both armies the soldiers fought in line rank by rank, but the Macedonian phalanx lacked mobility and formed a single unit; the Roman army was more elastic, made up of numerous divisions, which could easily act separately or in combination as required.



IV

HERACLEA, 280 BC: ROME'S FIRST TEST

That night he dreamed he was called by Alexander the Great, and approaching saw him sick abed, but was received with very kind words, and much respect and promised zealous assistance. Pyrrhus making bold to reply, "How, sir, can you, being sick, assist me?"

"With my name," Alexander replied, and mounting his horse, led the way before him.

Plutarch, Life of Pyrrhus

Pyrrhus of Epirus is, without a doubt, one of the greatest war leaders in history. Hannibal Barca, the famous Carthaginian general who nearly conquered Rome at the end of the 3rd century BC, ranked him just behind Alexander the Great when asked who he considered to be his top three generals of all time. Technically, Hannibal rated Pyrrhus third, because as Livy relates, Hannibal ranked his chief rival, the Roman Scipio Africanus, so great as to be outside any ranking. Pyrrhus, like Hannibal, was ultimately defeated and killed (Hannibal was forced to poison himself), but his fame nearly equaled that of his Carthaginian counterpart.

It seems almost manifest destiny. Pyrrhus was the second cousin of Alexander the Great himself, born to the royal house in the kingdom of Epirus, in what is now the border region between Greece and Albania. His life was a whirlwind almost from the day he was born. His father was driven out of Epirus when Pyrrhus was only two, and the boy was saved from his political rivals by a sympathetic neighboring king. Pyrrhus' father was later restored to the throne of Epirus, and his sister Deidama married into the Antigonid dynasty, tying Pyrrhus in bonds of kinship to them. In 301 BC, at the age of 18, he fought with incredible distinction at the great Battle of Ipsus, his bravery and skill leading many to comment that he was like a second Alexander. This didn't stop Pyrrhus from alternately allying with and against various Antigonid kings, and in the intervening years he lost his kingdom again, then regained it, along with

Macedon and parts of Greece, before losing everything except for Epirus, where he had retreated by the time he was 38 or 39 years old to lick his wounds, unhappy with his lot in life, and dreaming of greater glory and an empire beyond the rugged mountains of his childhood home.

I want to take a quick moment to talk about Plutarch, as he's our main source for Pyrrhus and his military career. Plutarch was writing nearly 400 years after the battle we're about to discuss, and that rightly leads a lot of people to ask, "How can you consider Plutarch to be a primary source?" Well, the truth is that, in this case, he's nearly the *only* textual source we have, and he's also *much* closer to the date of the battle than we are. But more importantly, Plutarch was working from sources himself. He cites many of these, particularly letters written by the actual people he's discussing, which are lost to modern historians. I suppose he could be lying about having access to these sources, but I have no reason to doubt him, and so I work with what I have. My favorite thing to say of Plutarch is – he has to be taken with a grain of salt, but he also has to be taken.

An Embassy from Italy

It was in Epirus that Pyrrhus received an embassy from the Greco-Italian city of Tarentum. At this time, around 280 BC, Rome ruled over only central Italy, with the north still held by Etruscans and Celts, and the south known as Magna Graecia (Greater Greece), in recognition of the Greek communities that had settled there and still maintained their independence. Tarentum (modern day Taranto, in Apulia) was originally a colony of Sparta, founded by exiled *partheniae*, literally – “sons of virgins,” the bastard sons of unmarried Spartan women. The settlers worked hard, and built the colony up into a major city-state and commercial hub with power over other Greek city-states on Italy's southern coast.

This power was directly threatened when the Romans finally triumphed in the Third Samnite War in 290 BC, and went on to found several colonies in Apulia, as well as entering several Italo-Greek cities in the region. Aristocratic factions in some of the Greek cities in southern Italy were arguing in favor of submitting to Rome, which worried democratic and free Tarentum greatly. They were proud both of their Greek heritage and of their role in Magna Graecia, and didn't want to lose their independence and enter into a *socii* relationship. Pyrrhus' fame as a brilliant general and a brave warrior had reached them, and voices were raised calling for sending an invitation to him to come over and assume command in the fight against the Romans.

Plutarch relates a bizarre story of the debate over whether or not to invite Pyrrhus. On the day the public decree of the invitation was to be announced, one of the Tarentines by the name of Meton reeled into the assembly acting like he was drunk, or maybe he really was drunk. Meton was carrying a garland of flowers and a lamp, with a woman playing a flute going before him. The Tarentines were good-natured people, and they laughed and egged him on, and

he turned and grinned at them. “You let people make merry, that’s good!” he said, “I encourage you to enjoy merry-making while you can. You’ll be singing a different tune once Pyrrhus gets here.”

You can imagine the stunned silence as the smiles faded, turned to angry frowns, then shouts of anger. The assembly threw him out, and the embassy was sent to Epirus.

This wasn’t the first time the Tarentines had asked a Hellenistic king to help them out. They had a history of conflict with other tribes in southern Italy and apparently didn’t have a lot of faith in their homegrown commanders. In 343 BC, they asked the Spartan king Archidamus III to lead a campaign against their neighbors, the Messapii. A decade later, they asked another Epirote king, Alexander I, to come over and fight against the Lucani, another Greco-Italian tribe. When Alexander I was killed in battle, the Tarentines invited another Spartan, Cleonymus, to lead them. All three appeals ended in disaster. Both Archidamus III and Alexander I died in battle, and Cleonymus, despite enjoying some initial success, was driven from the Italian shore. You’d think they’d have learned from this record, or that Pyrrhus would have cocked an eyebrow at his prospects for success, but like Afghanistan in modern times, Magna Graecia seemed to be one of those places great powers couldn’t resist invading.

Plutarch goes to great lengths to describe Pyrrhus’ restlessness, and his desire for glory and a place in history, and hints at Pyrrhus’ own belief that he was the second coming of Alexander the Great, in a dream sequence which is quoted in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter. He also gives other supernatural aspects of Pyrrhus, telling us that his upper teeth were all fused together into a single tooth with only indentations to mark where a normal person’s teeth would be. Pyrrhus was supposed to have ritual healing powers, a kind of ancient version of laying on of hands.

But the best insight into Pyrrhus’ character is bundled with a clear foreshadowing by Plutarch, as he relates a conversation between Pyrrhus and his friend and advisor Cineas. Cineas was from Thessaly, a region in northeastern Greece that produced some of the best cavalry of the time, and was known for his skill as an orator.

Seeing Pyrrhus swayed by the Tarentine embassy, Cineas said to him. “I hear the Romans are pretty tough. If the gods grant that we beat them, what then?”

“Well, that’s obvious,” Pyrrhus answered. “If we beat the Romans, who will be able to stand against us? Before long, we’d rule all of Italy.”

“Okay,” said Cineas. “So we conquer all of Italy. What next?”

Pyrrhus thought about it. “Sicily. It’s divided and the people don’t like their leaders. We could conquer it easily.”

“You’re probably right,” Cineas said. “So, you get all of Italy and Sicily, then you’re done? No more war?”

“No,” Pyrrhus said. “If the gods give us victory in Sicily, we’ll have the perfect jumping-off point to invade Libya and Carthage. Once we’ve mastered them, no one will dare oppose us.”

“And I assume that, after this, with none daring to oppose us, we’ll also conquer Macedon and all of Greece.”

Pyrrhus nodded and Cineas went on. “Okay, so we’ve now got Italy, Sicily, North Africa and Macedon and Greece. Now, what?”

Pyrrhus smiled. “Well, then I guess we enjoy ourselves. We’ll drink all day, spend time with our friends, and talk.”

Now it was Cineas’ turn to smile. “Nothing stops us from doing that now. We are all here, we have plenty of wine and time enough to talk. We don’t need to kill anybody to make that happen.”

It’s a great argument, but sadly not one that convinced Pyrrhus. He responded to the Tarentine embassy and assembled an army to sail across the Adriatic to Tarentum.

A Mighty Host, a Storm, and a Brave Man, Swimming for Shore

Pyrrhus assembled an impressive army by any standard: 20,000 infantry, 3,000 cavalry, 2,500 skirmishers (2,000 archers and 500 slingers), and 20 war elephants, creatures that most Romans had never seen before.

We have few details as to the exact makeup of Pyrrhus’ army. If other Hellenistic armies are anything to go on, most, if not all, of those 20,000 foot troops were phalangites, equipped and trained in the style we examined in chapter II. Some might have been lighter *thureophoroi*, and it is likely Pyrrhus would have had his own *agēma*.

His cavalry were most likely drawn largely from the crack horsemen of Thessaly, made famous for their service in the army of Alexander the Great. These heavy cavalry were famed for their ability to move in a diamond-shaped formation, with a leader at each point, ready to take command the moment the squadron needed to change direction. Armed with the *xyston*, a two-handed spear around 12 feet long, and possibly javelins, they were highly maneuverable and able to charge or harass with equal ease.

His slingers were probably drawn from the island of Rhodes off the southwestern coast of Turkey. Raised to the sling from childhood, they were second only to the residents of the Balearic islands off the eastern coast of Spain for their incredible aim. These slingers used two slings of different lengths depending on the range of their target, with the unused one tied around the head until it was needed. They slung either stones or specially made lead “bullets,” which they sometimes inscribed with sayings. A 4th century BC example currently on display in the British Museum has a winged thunderbolt on one side. On the other is the Greek word *dexai*, which roughly translates to “catch!”

When we consider the elephants, it’s important that we don’t make the mistake of assuming they’re the kind we see in modern zoos – African or Asian elephants, both very large. Pyrrhus’ elephants may have been North African forest elephants, also known as Atlas or Carthaginian elephants, a species that is now extinct, but was the one most likely to have been used in the Second Punic War,

from 218 to 201 BC. These elephants were much smaller than the elephants we know today, standing only around 8 feet at the shoulder. Some scholars argue that they were too small to carry a tower on their backs, and usually had just their handlers, who drove them forward in the hopes of frightening enemy infantry, spooking their horses, which would bolt at the smell of them, and trampling through formations. While these elephants were relatively small, they were still more than double the size of a horse, and weighed nearly 3 tons. The handlers, Indians, at least in Pyrrhus' army, would have been armed, possibly with a long spear or javelins, and there may have been an additional armored warrior on the elephant's back. The animal's great size along with the armed complement of handler and rider, not to mention its tusks, would have made it a powerful weapon.

Pyrrhus sent Cineas with an advance guard of 3,000 troops, then loaded the remaining troops onto transport ships sent by the Tarentines. They set sail across the Adriatic, and were about to make landfall in Italy when a storm blew in unexpectedly from the north. The calm sea quickly turned to frothing hills of gray steel, and the ships likely furled their sails, rowing hard for shore. The weather would not cooperate, the wind picking up and blowing straight into them, threatening to rip the ships to pieces. The Pyrrhic fleet was left with an impossible choice, drive straight into the wind and be torn apart, or let itself be blown back out to sea where the turbulent water could do worse than the wind.

In the end, Pyrrhus did something typically him: brave and, in retrospect, incredibly stupid. He jumped overboard and swam for shore, probably believing that the while the wind could act on a large object like a ship, it would have a tougher time against something as small as a lone man. It turns out he was right, and dawn on the following day found Pyrrhus exhausted, but alive, on the Italian shore in the region of the Messapii, the same people the Tarentines had brought in Archidamus III to fight. Apparently, the Messapii hated the Romans more than the Tarentines, because they helped Pyrrhus to regroup on shore with the tattered remains of his army: less than 2,000 infantry, a few cavalry and just two of the original 20 elephants.

It didn't look good. Nature had taken nearly all of Pyrrhus' great army before he'd even come to grips with the Romans. Another man might have given up there and then, but this was Pyrrhus of Epirus, the second coming of Alexander the Great, a man who believed firmly in the greatness of his destiny, and who had fearlessly jumped into the sea in the middle of a storm great enough to scatter a fleet of warships. He shrugged his shoulders and marched for Tarentum, where Cineas' advance guard of 3,000 infantry bolstered his ranks.

Remember Meton's prediction? It came true. The Tarentines were not the most disciplined people, as evidenced by their reliance on foreign commanders to fight their wars for them. That wasn't going to fly with Pyrrhus, who needed the Tarentines in fighting trim. While he waited for the ships scattered by the storm to come in, he focused on whipping the Tarentines into shape. He shut down the public gyms and promenades, and forbade drinking parties and festivals. He

enacted conscription, calling up Tarentine citizens to serve in his army. The Tarentines had fully expected Pyrrhus to conduct their war entirely on his own, and many fled the city, calling his edicts slavery. Before long, most of his storm-blown army had limped into the harbor, and Pyrrhus was back to nearly his original strength.

The Tarentines hoped to raise all of Magna Graecia to oppose the Romans, and promised Pyrrhus that many of the tribes would flock to his banner. Pyrrhus was counting on this. Since the Latin War 60 years earlier, Rome had been in a state of nearly unending conflict with its neighbors, and Pyrrhus had every reason to hope that these numerous enemies would greet him as a liberator and offer assistance. But Pyrrhus waited and waited, and quickly realized that the promised reinforcements were not going to show. We don't know for certain why he set out, but from what little we know of this hot-headed and impetuous man, it's likely he simply lost patience, and he felt confident in his own troops and his prospects for success.

Either way, Pyrrhus marched to meet the enemy.

Roman Response

Pyrrhus was a Hellenistic king. Like most men of his stripe, he would have considered Greek culture to be the pinnacle of civilization. To him, the Romans would have been crude savages. The word "barbarian" comes from the Greek *barbaros*, an insult that pokes fun at the foreigners' inability to speak civilized Greek. When they talked, it just sounded like "bar bar bar."

Unfortunately for Pyrrhus, this couldn't have been more wrong. Rome was already a highly developed civilization, with an equally developed military, the budding legion making the transition from its hoplite origins.

It's nearly impossible to bring an army of more than 20,000 people across the sea and keep it quiet. Rome was likely already preparing a response before Pyrrhus washed up on the Messapian shore. They moved to secure their colonies in the south, to prevent their other many enemies, such as the Etruscans, from allying with Pyrrhus against them, and, more importantly, to keep their "allies" from defecting. But the most significant action they took was to send the consul Publius Valerius Laevinus south at the head of an army, plundering the southern Italian region of Lucania as he went.

We have very few details as to Laevinus' character, and the army he commanded. We know that Laevinus was consul in 280 BC, and we know that his *gens*, a grouping of families with a common heritage, was ancient, distinguished and noble. Based on what we know of Roman consular armies at this time, Laevinus likely commanded two legions, each of approximately 5,000 men. That only adds up to about half of Pyrrhus' force, but it doesn't count the *socii*. So, when we say that Laevinus marched south with two legions, what we really mean is that he marched south with two legions and an equal number of Italian allied troops, for a rough total of 20,000 men. When you consider that

Pyrrhus had lost men in the shipwreck, that he had replenished this somewhat with the Tarentine citizens he'd been training, and then had been disappointed when Rome's enemies didn't provide the hoped-for reinforcements, we can estimate the two armies were roughly equal, or that Pyrrhus was slightly outnumbered.

When Laevinus' march threatened the Tarentine colony of Heraclea, Pyrrhus took up a blocking position on a flat plain near the Siris river (today it's called the Sinni), hoping to protect the settlement.

"We shall see presently what they can do":

Pyrrhus Digs in and Plays for Time

Pyrrhus knew he was in a good defensive position. The plain between Pandosia and Heraclea where he deployed his army was flat and even, good ground for the Hellenistic phalanx, who needed this kind of terrain to best guarantee their cohesion, even when moving and fighting. Even better, the Romans would have to cross a river to reach him, and their own formations would be slowed and disrupted as the legionaries tried to find their footing in the river mud. We can't know for sure how fast the Siris flowed over 2,000 years ago or how strongly the current pulled at armored men, but try to imagine having to stay in step with your fellow soldiers, unable to see the ground under your feet through the rushing water, coming under a hail of missiles – arrows, javelins or sling stones. Your sandals or boots would be soaked, and could get full of rocks and sand, which might tear at your feet once you were on dry land again. Forging a river in the face of a determined enemy was no easy task.

Pyrrhus knew this, and so he held his position, ordering his men to dig in and fortify it. At the same time, he sent word to Laevinus, offering himself up as a mediator between the Romans and the people of Magna Graecia. There was no need to fight. They could settle this with diplomacy. Laevinus sent back what historians now recognize as a typical Roman reply. "We don't accept you as a mediator, and we're not frightened to face you as an enemy."

Pyrrhus' offer of a peaceful solution is out of character from what I know of the man. Every source paints him as a hot-headed glory-hound with limitless ambition, so why would he back down before there was even an initial fight, when he was in a good position and confident of his army? I believe that Pyrrhus was playing for time, hoping that some of the promised reinforcements would arrive if he could delay Laevinus long enough. It feels far more like a tactical move than genuinely hoping to end things without a battle.

Some scholars believe that Pyrrhus' defensive posture, fortifying his position and holding at the river, was due to his concerns about being badly outnumbered. The truth is that we don't have reliable numbers for either side, and it makes more sense that he was holding good ground where his phalanx would work to the best advantage. The open, flat terrain would help them

maintain cohesion, and it would force the Romans to cross the river under a storm of missiles, leaving them disrupted at the point of impact.

Plutarch gives us a little more foreshadowing as he describes Pyrrhus riding up to the river to get a look at the Roman camp. Polybius gives us a great description of the Roman camp of this period. Roman military camps were set out like small towns, with predesignated roads, tents pitched by unit, ditches dug, palisades built and towers placed according to a regular plan that could be enacted to make the same camp, perfectly organized, each and every time the Romans came off the march.

Pyrrhus saw this, and he also saw the discipline of the Roman soldiers, their care of their gear and their setting of watches. He turned to his friend Megacles. “These don’t look like barbarians to me,” he said. “I guess we’ll see what they can do.”

This was high praise indeed. To a Hellenistic king, anything outside the Greek tradition would be undisciplined and savage, a beast to be tamed. Seeing the Romans as locked on as his own troops unsettled the king, and he likely rejoined his army with the first twinges of doubt pulling at him.

Across the River – The Battle of Heraclea Begins

Pyrrhus knew his position was strong, and probably didn’t expect his enemy to attempt a crossing, so long as the riverbank was held. To that end, he dispatched a small force to accomplish this. We don’t know who they were, or how many, but they were likely light infantry skirmishers, or *thureophoroi*. The bank secured, he turned to other business, thinking he had plenty of time for his allies to arrive.

He didn’t.

We don’t know exactly how long Laevinus waited, but we do know that Pyrrhus was alerted, likely by the shouts of his men, the whirring of sling stones or javelins flying through the air.

The Romans were fording the river. Not an advance party. Not a raid. The whole damn army.

The small force on the bank knew they couldn’t hold out against such overwhelming numbers, even if they did have the better ground. Fearing they’d be surrounded, they began to pull back. I picture this force as Rhodian slingers and Thracian javelineers, focused on the threat to their front, backpedaling slowly, deafened by the shouting and the men clanking and splashing through the water.

They didn’t hear the hoofbeats until it was too late.

Suddenly, the reason the Romans had sounded a general advance despite the fact that they’d be fording a river under missiles was clear. The main army was a distraction. Laevinus had sent his *equites*, Rome’s noble but inexperienced cavalry, across the river by more distant fords. These squadrons had made it to the other side, wheeled their mounts, and charged into the flanks of the retreating infantry, who turned in confusion, suddenly facing a threat from all sides. They couldn’t

hold their position for long.

This was a disaster. Not only had Pyrrhus' river guard been caught napping, but now the main body of their army was right on top of the riverbank. If the Roman infantry gained the riverbank, they'd be on dry ground without having to fight at all. The Siris was a huge part of Pyrrhus' advantage, and he was on the verge of losing it at the very start of the battle.

But Pyrrhus was nothing if not a quick thinker. He immediately ordered the phalanx to form up and move out, and raced out ahead of them, leading 3,000 of his cavalry in a countercharge.

Ancient heavy cavalry were good for delivering shock charges to the flank or rear of an infantry unit, for running down individual soldiers, or for fighting other cavalry, but they were weak fighting against formed infantry head on. Their horses made big targets, and, with rare exceptions, the animals were not well armored. An infantryman would have a hard time missing a horse's belly, and in bringing the animal down, he had the rider at his mercy. With the Roman infantry almost across the river, Pyrrhus knew he was riding into a difficult situation.

But if he could buy enough time for his phalanx to reach the riverbank, it would be worth it.

It was one hell of a fight. The Romans didn't fight like other men Pyrrhus had faced. They were fearless and pitiless, getting in close and staying there, keeping on the attack with near suicidal bravery. The Romans had been bred on the idea of *virtus* – a relentless martial courage – and Pyrrhus was but one of many enemies who would learn this was an enemy who would refuse to back down even when they were clearly beaten. Laevinus' response to Pyrrhus' embassy hadn't been mere bluster. He was deadly serious.

The infantry soon joined the cavalry, and the fight turned ugly. Pyrrhus' cavalry would have been his very best, if they were around the person of the king (Livy speaks of "sacred squadrons," *sacrae alae*), but even they would have been at a serious disadvantage as the Roman skirmishers probably backed off to use their missiles or stabbed at the horses' bellies with their swords. Soon enough, the *hastati* would have scrambled ashore, better armed and armored, able to surround a plunging horse and attack it from all sides, while the rider could only defend one.

It was at this moment that Pyrrhus' friend Leonnatus – we know he was a Macedonian, but not much else about him – called out. "Watch out for that Roman on the black horse with the white socks! He's looking right at you!"

Pyrrhus' reply was typical for him. "If it's my fate that he kills me, so be it, but it won't be easy for him."

No sooner had he spoken than the Roman kicked his horse and charged Pyrrhus.

Here, the account becomes a little confused. Plutarch tells us this Roman speared Pyrrhus' horse, and then had his own speared out from under him by Leonnatus. However, Dionysius tells us that Leonnatus speared the Roman's

horse first, and as he went down, this daring Roman speared Pyrrhus' horse. Either way, both horses were killed, and Pyrrhus' bodyguard dragged him away from the fighting. This may seem cowardly, and from what I know of Pyrrhus, I doubt he could have been happy about it, but he also wasn't a fool; he had to know that his death would shatter the morale of his army.

It turns out this daring enemy wasn't a Roman after all, he was a Frentani, from an allied Italian tribe on Italy's east coast, around the modern town of Lanciano, which Rome had subdued and forced to become an ally during the Second Samnite War in 319 BC. Plutarch gives his name as Oplax, and calls him a cavalry officer. Dionysius names him Oblacus Volsinius, and considered him an important figure among the Frentani. Either way, the man was likely captured or killed, despite his daring strike at the king of Epirus, and he disappears from the sources afterwards.

“The king is dead!” – The Battle Turns

The close brush with death clearly rattled Pyrrhus' inner circle, and while we don't know the exact reasons why, we do know that Pyrrhus' friend Megacles swapped armor with the king, presumably to divert any further attempts on his life. Maybe Pyrrhus was truly rattled by his close encounter with the brave Frentani, but again, that doesn't fit with what I know of him. The man was brave to a fault, and it's more likely that Megacles, backed up by Pyrrhus' other close advisors, forced the swap. Dionysius goes out of his way to describe how magnificent Pyrrhus' armor was, his purple cloak shot through with gold. There would be no mistaking the man who wore it as the king.

But now it appeared that Pyrrhus had the battle well in hand. The phalanx had reached the Romans, and the battle lines were locked together, the Romans unable to make any headway against the solid wall of iron presented by the lowered pikes. With the river at their backs, there was nowhere for the Romans to go, but they fought with dogged determination, refusing to give an inch. Pyrrhus must have been both awed and frustrated by their incredible tenacity. Still, Pyrrhus had a formed phalanx on flat ground, and the Romans hadn't found a way to hit the phalanx's flanks or rear. All Pyrrhus had to do was hold out long enough, and eventually, the legion would crack.

And then, everything turned on its head.

Megacles, dressed in Pyrrhus' armor and cloak, was swarmed by Romans determined to win the honor of killing the king. One of them, whom Plutarch names Dexoüs, brought him down. Thinking he'd killed Pyrrhus, Dexoüs pulled off Pyrrhus' helmet and cloak and brought them to Laevinus. “The king is dead!” Dexoüs would have shouted, waving the helmet over his head. “Pyrrhus is dead!”

Laevinus was no fool. He knew that to doubt the claim would damage the morale of his soldiers, whereas he lost nothing by agreeing. Besides, he had no reason to doubt. This was indeed the king's helmet and cloak. He ordered them paraded through the ranks, and cheers went up from the Romans, who surged

forward. With their king dead, what were the Epirotes fighting for? Their courage would surely fail them now.

They weren't wrong. As the Roman spirits rose, so those of the Epirotes and their allies fell. Ancient warriors were superstitious, and Plutarch has already alluded to Pyrrhus' supposed divine powers. If their king had been killed so easily in his first battle against the Romans, maybe it meant the gods favored the enemy? Pyrrhus' troops were across the sea from their homes, in foreign territory, and now without the very man for whose glory they'd come. Pike heads dipped, shield arms drooped. All along the phalanx, the line began to waver, and the Romans, sensing their advantage, pressed forward.

Pyrrhus knew that the battle hung on a knife's edge. Once his soldiers' morale cracked, they would run. Remember that most casualties in a battle were inflicted during the rout, when one side broke and ran and the other pursued, mercilessly cutting the fleeing enemy down. Here, even the weaker Roman cavalry would excel, plunging among the fleeing Epirotes, stabbing as they went.

Pyrrhus was only one man in a crowd of thousands, and he would be shouting over the roaring tumult of an active battle, but he tried anyway. He raced out in front of his men, showing his face, crying out with his familiar voice, something like, "I am alive! Stand firm, I am alive!"

If you believe Plutarch, this worked, and the Epirote army rallied at the sight of their king, but this is extremely unlikely. In reenactment battles, which are on a much smaller scale and likely much quieter than Heraclea, I can barely see the man in front of me, much less a random figure galloping around a tiny portion of the battlefield. With a helmet on, the clanking of armor and the shouts of fellow reenactors, I certainly can't hear commands from anything but the shortest distance. To accept that this worked for Pyrrhus is to suspend disbelief more than I am able.

Here's what probably happened: what Plutarch says occurred next is actually what saved the day for the Epirotes – the elephants finally charged.

We can't forget that when Pyrrhus finally washed up in Messapii territory after the storm, he only had two of his original 20 elephants. But Plutarch gives the impression that the fleet was only scattered by the storm, and not utterly destroyed, and so he had recovered these by the time of the battle. However many he had, and even if they were the smaller Atlas variety, the sight of charging elephants would scare the hell out of anyone, especially people who'd never seen one before. Remember, ancient people were not as worldly as we are. They quite literally believed in magic and monsters. What must the Romans have thought as these giant creatures slammed into the flanks of their formation? What sorcery did they believe Pyrrhus had at his disposal? Still, the Romans were no cowards, and these legionaries were hardened veterans of the Samnite Wars. They were no strangers to fear. Even after the elephants charged home, they held on.

But in the end, the Roman cavalry made the decision for the whole army. The Roman soldiers might have been able to hold out against the onslaught of Pyrrhus' elephants, but their horses could not. They bolted, plunging madly

through the ranks, bowling infantry over in their panicked rush to the rear. The contagious panic spread like wildfire. Within moments, the Roman line crumbled as the infantry followed, abandoning their formation, their swords and their shields, all thought consumed by the desire to run.

This was a touch of the familiar in an entirely unfamiliar battle for Pyrrhus. The enemy was routing. He knew exactly what to do.

He gave the signal, and his crack Thessalian horsemen surged forward, giving chase. We don't know exactly how it played out, whether the cavalry ran the fleeing Romans down in the river, or on the shore, whether the legionaries turned to stand and fight, or were speared in the back; we can only go by Plutarch's vague description, all the more horrifying for its generality, that Pyrrhus routed them with "great slaughter."

Aftermath

Some scholars don't credit the phalanx with Pyrrhus' victory at Heraclea. After all, it was the elephants that finally broke the enemy, and the battle seesawed dangerously the entire time, one moment favoring Laevinus, the next Pyrrhus. It could have just as easily gone the other way.

But it didn't. Pyrrhus' phalanx had done what it was designed to do: make an impassable, lethal barrier that held the enemy in check. Alexander the Great had used his phalanx in precisely this way, pinning the enemy to allow his cavalry to get in position to deliver a knockout blow. At Heraclea, Pyrrhus had done something similar with his elephants. The legionaries, foundering in the water and on the soft ground of the riverbank, peppered by missiles, tired and frightened, were unable to come to grips with the long Epirote pikes, closing near enough to use their short swords. The phalanx had proven, on good ground and with its flanks and rear secured, unbeatable yet again.

Death tolls and army sizes in ancient sources are almost always grossly exaggerated, but Plutarch goes to some effort to list his own sources here, and I feel reasonably confident about the figure of 7,000 Roman dead and 2,000 captured, all at a cost of 4,000 of Pyrrhus' warriors. These casualty figures come into sharper focus when you consider them against modern battles. In 2004, the Second Battle of Fallujah in Iraq fielded fewer troops, but also pro-rated far lower casualties, about 107 killed among the American and British forces, and 1,200 *al-Qa'ida* and allied fighters. Seven thousand people is a lot of people. It's almost a small division – around three whole regiments.

The sheer loss of manpower was staggering on both sides, and while the thrill of victory must have cheered Pyrrhus, the losses had to have worried him. Unlike the Romans, he was in foreign territory, without a ready supply of solid recruits. His "allies" in Magna Graecia had already proven unreliable, and he was probably scrambling to fill up his thinned ranks. Even worse, most of those killed were his most senior, veteran officers, men like Megacles. Anyone who has served in the military knows that veterans are the core of any functioning unit. There is an

enormous range of instincts and “soft skills” a warrior builds over years in service. Raw troops, no matter how able and gifted, just can’t measure up until they’ve had time to season in the cauldron of war.

Perhaps Pyrrhus was hoping he wouldn’t need to worry about it. He had, after all, won a decisive victory. Even now, word would be spreading of the crushing defeat he’d inflicted on Rome. Maybe the Romans would see it was hopeless to resist, and agree to peace terms. Surely, now their so-called “allies” would defect to his cause. Pyrrhus probably took comfort in this as he surveyed the dead and wounded.

But, like Hannibal after him, he didn’t reckon on Roman pride.



V

ASCULUM, 279 BC: “ONE MORE SUCH VICTORY, AND WE ARE UNDONE.”

We are told that there were forty thousand men on each side. Half of Pyrrhus’ army was lost; but the Romans lost only five thousand.

Sextus Julius Frontinus, *Stratagems*

Details on the Battle of Asculum are thin, but we are in slightly better shape in one respect. In addition to Livy, Dionysius and Plutarch, we now have some passages from the turn of the 1st century AD Roman senator Frontinus, which shed some light on things like the number of troops involved. We also have some fragments from the Greek historian Appian, also from the turn of the 1st century AD, as well as more extensive work from Appian’s contemporary, the Roman senator Cassius Dio.

But even with the additional material, Asculum is confusing. Cassius Dio tells us the Romans won. Plutarch gives the victory to Pyrrhus, and Dionysius simply doesn’t say who won. Plutarch’s account is the strongest, especially when you consider his sober casualty figures and his tendency to cite his own sources. I give his account the most weight, but only with the full awareness that I’m standing on very thin ice.

The second battle of the Pyrrhic War ran very differently from the first, but to properly understand it, we need to consider the path to it, starting with Pyrrhus’ confident advance toward Rome in the aftermath of Heraclea.

Negotiations go South

As Hannibal would later learn, the Roman levy system excelled at getting men under arms very, very quickly. Heraclea was, by any standard, a disaster for Rome, but you wouldn’t have known it from the way Rome reacted. Almost immediately, the recruiting machine kicked into high gear, enrolling fresh troops to replace the ones that had been lost.

Through it all, Pyrrhus marched north toward Rome, hailed as a liberator in each Italian city he passed through, his own ranks swelling with Greco-Italians

and unhappy Roman “allies” who had been conquered in the Samnite and Latin Wars.

Pyrrhus definitely had the momentum, and his glorious progress north had to make him feel like the war was going his way. Still, he was far from home and knew Rome would be a tough nut to crack, so he sent Cineas ahead as an ambassador to try and arrange peace terms. These terms were generous. Cineas brought many expensive gifts, and offered to return all the prisoners captured at Heraclea without forcing Rome to pay a ransom – ransoming captives was the usual process in the ancient world. He even offered to help Rome subjugate Italy, except for Tarentum, which Rome would have to agree to leave alone. Rome and Epirus would be allies. If you look at the negotiations after most ancient battles, and what the winners offered to the losers, you’ll see that these terms were so good as almost to strain belief.

But the Romans refused them. This is less surprising when you consider Roman commitment and tenacity in the Second Punic War, but Plutarch tells an interesting story about this refusal. He says the senate was inclined to accept Pyrrhus’ offer, but were shamed out of it by the famous Roman politician Appius Claudius, the same man who gave Rome its first major road – the Appian Way. Ancient and blind, Claudius had himself carried around the senate floor, yelling at the senate to refuse peace with Pyrrhus. “I’ve hated being blind,” he said, “but now, I wish I were deaf, too. Then I wouldn’t have to hear you bring shame to Rome.”

His argument, that peace with Pyrrhus would embolden Rome’s enemies and cheapen its own sacred honor, apparently resonated, and the senate voted to reject Cineas’ offer. He was sent back to Pyrrhus to tell him that Rome would only be his friend after he left the peninsula, taking his army with him. He could win 10,000 battles like Heraclea, and they would still fight him, so long as he was in Italy.

Cineas told Pyrrhus of the amazing speed and efficiency of Roman recruiting, and that they had already made up their losses from Heraclea and more besides. This news was followed by Rome’s ambassador, Caius Fabricius, who came to secure the release of the Roman prisoners from Heraclea. Pyrrhus first tried to bribe the man, and later to frighten him by hiding an elephant behind a wall hanging, having it walk out and trumpet over Fabricius’ head from behind. Fabricius, who’d never seen an elephant before, is said to have been completely calm. “Your gold didn’t impress me,” the Roman said, “and this doesn’t either.”

Pyrrhus greatly admired Fabricius, and went so far as to offer him a place as first among his *hetairoi*, “companions” – an exalted title for Hellenistic kings. “You’d better hope I don’t accept,” Fabricius said, “because your people, once they got to know me, would prefer I be king instead of you.” Pyrrhus is supposed to have taken this barb in his stride, and sent the prisoners back with Fabricius to see their relatives on the condition that, if the peace settlement wasn’t agreed to, they would return to Pyrrhus’ custody. Per Plutarch, that’s exactly what happened, with the senate giving the death penalty to any who refused to honor

the agreement.

Plutarch gives more evidence of the importance of Roman honor, even when it worked against them. When Pyrrhus' physician offered to poison the king for Fabricius, who was now a consul, Fabricius informed Pyrrhus, telling him that he was a bad judge of both friends and enemies, since he had picked this traitor as his doctor, and had picked a fight with Rome. Fabricius added that he wasn't telling the king because he wanted to be his friend, but because he didn't want to stain Rome's honor by winning through treachery. He wanted to beat Pyrrhus on the battlefield. Pyrrhus responded by releasing the Roman prisoners yet again without a ransom. The Romans again refused to accept them for nothing, which they would have regarded as a sign of friendship. To pay for Pyrrhus' kindness, they released an equivalent number of prisoners-of-war, reminding him that there could be no friendship until he took his army out of Italy.

Bad Ground: The Shattered Hills of Asculum

Asculum is known today as Ascoli Satriano, a town in the Apulia region of southeast Italy. It's around 120 miles northwest of Tarentum and only another 200 miles or so to Rome, which couldn't have made the Romans very comfortable. It's hilly country, broken by rivers that feed abundant vegetation. In short, it's not great ground to employ a phalanx, as Pyrrhus would soon discover.

The Romans sent another army to stop Pyrrhus' northern advance, four legions and their complement of allied troops, which would be around 40,000 men. Frontinus puts the forces at about equal at this number, and statements in the other sources show us that once again, Pyrrhus was slightly outnumbered. Dionysius has each side at around 70,000 infantry and 8,000 or so cavalry, which is clearly an exaggeration. But Dionysius does give us a very specific breakdown of Pyrrhus' "order of battle," a modern military term used to describe the structure of a military organization, which is believable.

We've seen that the position of honor in a battle line was out on the right, and that's where Pyrrhus put his Macedonian phalangites. To their left were mercenaries hired from Tarentum and troops from Ambracia, a city in northern Greece known today as Arta, and then a phalanx of Tarentine White Shields. We have already gotten the impression that the Tarentine troops were not as good as Pyrrhus' Epirote or Macedonian phalanx, so this fits well with our earlier estimation that the White Shields were considered inferior troops. Next to the White Shields were units of Bruttians and Lucanians, both Greco-Italian tribes from the south. The next troops over formed the center of the line – Thesprotians and Chaonians, regions of Epirus, in what is today northeastern Greece. Beside these were units of Greek mercenaries – Aetolians, Acarnanians and Athamanians, all northern Greek/Epirote regions. Pyrrhus' left wing was made up of Samnites, a south-central Italian tribe who had presumably defected from a Roman alliance. An important detail – Dionysius specifically describes the Samnites as being equipped with "oblong shields." The *peltē* is round, so

although Dionysius refers to the Samnites as a phalanx, they were likely armed as *thureophoroi*. Again, remember the word substitutions we saw earlier with Gratius and Livy: *contos* when Gratius means *saris*, *caetra* when Livy means *peltē*. The use of the word phalanx here likely just means a block of heavy infantry, which the Samnite *thureophoroi* would have been.

Pyrrhus covered his flanks with cavalry, and put his light troops and elephants in two groups behind the wings. Dionysius tells us that Pyrrhus rode with 2,000 of his *agēma*, outside the battle line, ready to fill in wherever he was needed.

Dionysius' account of the Roman order of battle is just as detailed. They put the 1st Legion (*Legio I*) on their left, facing the Macedonians, Ambraciots and the Tarentine White Shields. The 3rd Legion (*Legio III*) came next, facing off against the Bruttians and Lucanians. After them came the 4th Legion (*Legio IV*), facing the Epirote phalanx. The Roman right was held by the 2nd Legion (*Legio II*), who were arrayed against the Greek mercenaries and the Samnites. The Romans brought in troops from a wide range of allied Italian tribes – the Latins, Campanians, Dauni, Umbrians, Volscians, Marrucini, Peligni, Ferentani and others. These were divided into four “wings” and interspersed among the legions, though Dionysius doesn't specify exactly how. The Romans were led by the consuls Publius Decius Mus and Publius Sulpicius Saverius.

Decius' father and grandfather had both “devoted” themselves, a Roman custom in which commanders of losing armies charged straight into the enemy in the full knowledge that it was suicide. Such acts were thought to bring the favor of the gods, who would turn the tide of battle and grant victory to Rome. Obviously, such an act would be a blow to Pyrrhus' troops' morale, so when a rumor arose that Decius planned to stage his own *devotio* during the battle, Pyrrhus sent him a message that if he tried it, Pyrrhus would ensure he was captured alive and tortured. The Romans replied that Decius wouldn't need to stage a *devotio*, because they were not going to be losing.

The Roman army was drawn up in a solid defensive position. It was, in one way, a reverse of Heraclea, with the Romans defending a small and swiftly flowing river. Our sources aren't firm on how many days the two armies sized one another up, but Cassius Dio tells us that eventually “*in order that the forces might encounter each other intact and so from a battle with conditions equal the test of valor might be made an accurate one,*” Pyrrhus allowed the Romans to cross. Cassius Dio says this is because the king was confident that his elephants would carry the day, but that doesn't make sense. Pyrrhus wasn't a fool, and he wouldn't cede a chance to attack the Romans as they crossed the river if he didn't have to. We've already seen at Heraclea that he tried to hold the riverbank and prevent the Romans from crossing. He made the mistake of stationing too small a guard on the riverbank, and of not scouting sufficiently down the river to see if there were fords by which the enemy would cross, but he still clearly appreciated the importance of using the river as a defensive barrier. So why would he simply allow the Romans to cross this time?

Pyrrhus may have been trying to find better ground to employ his phalanx.

Hills tend to get steeper as they slope down toward water as part of the natural effect of the carving water, broken by roots and rocks, as the winding water washes soil away and leaves obstacles exposed. This uneven ground is the phalanx's worst enemy, sapping cohesion as phalangites stumble or are forced to step around and over rocks or fallen trees. All of our sources agree that Asculum was horrible ground for a phalanx, and Pyrrhus may have thought that in accepting the Roman request to cross he was allowing his troops to withdraw onto flatter ground further from the riverbank that was more suitable for employing his phalanx.

There's some other evidence to support this. Dionysius shows Pyrrhus deploying his phalanx in a broken line, with the allied units in between the Epirote and Greek units. The Italian units would likely have been less reliable troops, and may not even have been armed in the Macedonian style. This broken deployment may have been a reaction to the bad ground, an effort to make the slow, lumbering phalanx just a little more nimble. This makes a lot more sense than Pyrrhus putting all his faith in his elephants.

At any rate, Pyrrhus did allow the Romans to cross, only to find they had an answer to his elephants. They had built war-wagons crammed with missile troops, and decked out with anti-elephant devices. Exactly how these devices worked isn't clear, but they appear to have been cranes or poles equipped with blades, grapples and burning torches, all designed to either mitigate the elephants' height or panic them into rampaging among their own troops. A panicked horse, driven mad by the pain of wounds or frightened by loud noises, might throw its rider or bolt, even trample a friendly soldier. But an elephant reacting the same way could smash apart an entire formation, forcing soldiers to abandon cohesion to get out of the way, or else risk being squashed under its 3 tons. As subsequent battles will show, war elephants could be as great a danger to their own side as to the enemy.

Charge and Countercharge – The Battle

The lines engaged according to their custom. The Pyrrhic phalanx leveled their pikes, trying to form an unbroken line that the Romans couldn't hope to penetrate. The Romans hurled their javelins, trying to get the phalangites to drop their shields, or to kill or wound enough of them that holes would open in the impenetrable defense that could be rushed, closing the distance to use their deadly short swords. The Romans were worried about the elephants, which they remembered all too well from Heraclea, and fought ferociously, determined to make an end of things before the monsters could be deployed.

Pyrrhus had kept the elephants in reserve on his flanks, screened behind his cavalry, who were even now charging forward. They were met by the Roman and allied cavalry, and a confused fight erupted on the flanks of the battle line. Where the Pyrrhic cavalry engaged in the Macedonian style, wheeling, charging, dashing away, charging back in again, the Roman cavalry fought more like infantry,

reining in their horses and holding their ground. Pyrrhus likely knew the effect that his elephants would have on horses, forcing them to flee as they did at Heraclea, so he waited until the cavalry battle had moved on before sending them in.

But the cloud of dueling cavalry, when it cleared, revealed the Roman anti-elephant wagons, and no sooner had Pyrrhus deployed his elephants than they were stopped, thrown into chaos. The huge beasts would have bellowed and trampled in circles, sparing neither ally nor enemy, as the Romans thrust burning torches on poles at them, “*turning the fire-bearing grapnels into their eyes*” as Dionysius tells us. The wagons were also crammed with missile troops, most likely slingers, and javelineers, who peppered the elephants with projectiles. Tiny pinpricks to a creature as big as an elephant, but you add enough pinpricks together and you can get an upset elephant.

But Pyrrhus had anticipated, if not the anti-elephant wagons, at least a threat to his most precious military asset, and had deployed light infantry among his elephants. Here the story gets confused depending on which source you believe. Either Pyrrhus shifted his elephants to the opposite side of his battle line, or these light infantry returned fire on the anti-elephant wagons, killing and wounding their crews. I talked about Pyrrhus’ Rhodian slingers in chapter III. These warriors were incredibly accurate and could keep up a steady rain of lead and stone. Before long, the oxen pulling the wagons lay dead, or were driven mad with pain, breaking their traces and galloping off. The crews broke soon after, fleeing for the safety of the Roman legionaries, disrupting their cohesion in the process.

Whatever actually happened with the elephants and wagons, the sources mostly agree that the two battle lines clashed straight on and that the Romans either slowly drove the Pyrrhic forces back (if you believe Cassius Dio), or even broke their line (if you believe Dionysius).

Even the nature of the ground they fought on isn’t clear. Plutarch tells us that Pyrrhus had forced a night march, sending some light troops, slingers and archers, to occupy “the unfavorable parts of the field,” hemming in the Romans and forcing them to fight on flat ground. If this is true, it’s an unforgivable mistake on the part of the Romans. They had the experience of fighting the phalanx at Heraclea, and their choice of battlefield for Asculum was likely based at least in part on their understanding that it operated best on flat ground. Roman discipline and attention to detail was famous even in this age, and they wouldn’t have allowed themselves to be driven off critical terrain simply because it was night and they were tired. Dionysius describes Pyrrhus’ decision to intersperse allied units in between his Greek and Epirote phalangites. Some scholars believe this decision was made to provide maneuverability and flexibility even at the price of cohesion, which we know was critical to the phalanx. Why would he do that if he had the flat ground he wanted? This casts doubts on Plutarch’s version of events here.

Whatever happened in the main infantry fight, it’s clear that the Romans had

the best of it initially. Dionysius tells us that the right wing of each army was stronger, and drove back the respective left wings of their enemy. This makes sense, since as we discussed above that more elite troops were usually stationed to the right. Dionysius singles out Pyrrhus' Macedonians as distinguishing themselves, having them push back the 1st Legion and their Latin allies. The Roman 2nd Legion, on their right, had the better of their fight with Pyrrhus' Epirote phalangites.

The fight had stabilized, and the Romans were steadily pushing the Pyrrhic forces back until either Pyrrhus decided that his phalanx was in danger of collapsing, or the Roman 4th Legion broke through Pyrrhus' Bruttian and Lucanian allies (depending on which source you believe), and he moved to intervene.

Dionysius tells us that Pyrrhus committed his elephants to the "part of the line that was in difficulties," which was likely the same section held by the Bruttii and Lucanii. Cassius Dio tells us that Pyrrhus shifted his elephants to the other side of the battle line, which would give the impression they were being used on the flanks, instead of shoring up a hole in the line, which Dionysius seems to be implying.

From a dramatic-story perspective, I love the 4th Legion breaking through the Bruttii and Lucanians, though there must have been some shifting in the chaos of battle, because it was the 3rd Legion which was arrayed against them in the initial lineup. Apart from the Samnites, we don't know how these Pyrrhic allies were armed. The Macedonian-style phalanx was certainly the leading infantry style of the time; the people of Magna Graecia wouldn't have been ignorant of it, and it is likely that they were equipped and trained as Hellenistic phalangites, especially when we consider that Dionysius is referring to them as phalanxes. But we can't rule out the possibility that they were armed as hoplites or *thureophoroi* or something else entirely.

But bear with me, because this is the story I like. The Romans had spent much of Heraclea stuck on the banks of the Siris, pushed off by the impossible thicket of Pyrrhic pikes, unable to come to grips with the enemy. Each legionary only had two javelins, and once these were thrown, there was nothing to do but rush that maddeningly thick mass of metal points, desperately trying to snap off the heads, or rip them out of their wielders' hands, or hope that through speed or agility or just blind luck, his shield and armor would keep him safe until he got close enough to work that special magic that was a legionary inside the 2-foot sweet spot where he could really use his short sword.

I like to think that maybe the legionaries learned from Heraclea. Perhaps they figured out that by timing their rush with their shields locked, they could ward off enemy thrusts for long enough to get in close. Perhaps they figured a way to feint low with the shield to draw the pike points up toward the unprotected face, then raced in, jerking the shield up to cover. This is a question for reenactors and experimental archaeologists to answer. Unfortunately, it's tough to replicate in accurate conditions, first because it's hard to get thousands of reenactors on a

battlefield to even approach the real numbers and their impact on the fighting, and second because it's incredibly dangerous to simulate this in anything even close to real life conditions.

So, once again, left with a lack of data, I tell the story that I like best. The brave *hastati* of the 4th, eager to show the *principes* behind them that while they might be young, they were no cowards, pushed their way past the pike heads, many of their number screaming and falling, the iron punching through their shields, their pectorals, their flesh. But those that didn't fall made it inside, and suddenly the fight shifted dramatically. In the phalanx's interior, the Roman sword was king, and the tight press of bodies made it impossible for the phalangites in the rear ranks to effectively pick their targets. One instant, a phalangite would feel the crush of a Roman shield slamming into his own, the next he would see the legionary's eyes, burning with anger, his enemy so close he could smell his breath. And then the pain would come, as the legionary drove the short sword into the phalangite's belly, or up under his armpit, or into his face.

The phalangite was simply no good up close. Within moments, all cohesion disintegrated, and the Bruttii and Lucani became a panicked mass, running for their lives. The Tarantine troops, seeing their fellow Greco-Italians fleeing, thought the battle lost, and they too gave way, running with all they had. This is yet further proof that the White Shields were an inferior class of troops.

I can't overstate how serious this is. A hole in a battle line usually spelled defeat in the ancient world, and this was doubly true for the phalanx, for which all efficacy depended on cohesion. Pyrrhus moved quickly to plug the breach, sending his *agēma* in, and even calling horsemen off his right flank to join them.

I've mentioned before that in ancient warfare, cavalry usually were at a disadvantage against formed heavy infantry, but this move by Pyrrhus seems to have turned the tide and kept his line from collapsing. Maybe it was because the core of this cavalry were the finest in his army, his elite *agēma*, or maybe it was because the Romans were exhausted and disordered by the superhuman effort they'd needed to break Pyrrhus' line. Likely, it was a combination of both. One can imagine the *hastati*, young and inexperienced, stunned and amazed that they'd pulled off their mad charge. They watched the fleeing phalangites with awe, hearing the shouts and cheers of their comrades in the *principes*.

And then the pounding hooves, and before they'd had a moment to catch their breath, Pyrrhus' best horsemen were upon them. The *hastati* were exhausted and unprepared, still celebrating their breakthrough. They were bowled over, trampled and speared, their victory suddenly turned to sickening defeat. I picture the *hastati* withdrawing in the best order they could manage, pulling back behind the *principes*, fresh troops, older men who had faced cavalry charges before. They stepped in, sealed the gap and the battle lines stabilized once again.

But the countercharge would have shaken the Romans, and Pyrrhus would have seen that the stabilized line favored his side now, the Romans beginning to waver now that their mad charge had failed.

And then he heard shouts from behind him and everything went to hell.

“Manifest intervention of divine power”: Pyrrhus’ Camp Burns

When we talk about an “army camp,” most people think of a modern field camp, composed of rows of flimsy tents. This was part of what you’d expect in an ancient army camp, but there were some notable differences. For one thing, they were usually fortified with a palisade, or a ditch and berm, and frequently all three. But much more importantly, they were often more like small towns, featuring a lot of comforts that we’d never allow in a modern military base. Vendors, prostitutes, children and hangers-on were often found in and around ancient military camps and marched with the armies, selling their services or trailing husbands, lovers or fathers as they went off to war.

Even more significant was the treasure. Ancient soldiers were paid, but plunder was a major motivator both for signing on in the first place, and for sticking with the fight even when the going got tough. A man could get rich on a successful campaign, and in an age before banks, this loot – coins, stolen goods, livestock and slaves – was all stored in the army’s camp while the army was in the field of battle. For many soldiers, everything they owned was stored in the camp, and the loss of an army’s “baggage,” would literally make them into paupers.

So when the dispatch rider reached Pyrrhus and told him that his camp was burning, he wasn’t just talking about a bunch of tents.

It turns out that the Daunii, Roman allies from Apulia, had stumbled across Pyrrhus’ camp while seeking to attack his army in the rear. Pyrrhus had left it lightly guarded, trying to have as many troops in the field as he could.

It was an entire brigade of Daunii, around 4,000 infantry and 400 cavalry, and Pyrrhus immediately sent some of his elephants and whatever cavalry could be spared racing to the rescue. A total of 4,400 enemy soldiers is a lot, and I am suspicious as to whether or not Pyrrhus’ ad hoc relief force would have been able to do much, especially as they were coming from the middle of a fight, with all of the fatigue and wounds that would entail. That said, if they could make it in time, they at least had a chance of driving off the Daunii.

The riders pushed their tired mounts as hard as they could, but the flames flickering against the sky told them they were too late. The burned-out camp had been picked clean, and the Daunii had left only the corpses of servants and loved ones behind.

What happened next is, once again, unclear. Dionysius has the Daunii retreating to a hill too high and steep to be assaulted by the troops Pyrrhus sent to save the camp. Cassius Dio tells us that the sudden departure of the elephants and cavalry in the direction of the camp told the men of the phalanx what had just happened, and within moments, the formation began to waver as the soldiers worried that their personal fortunes would be stolen, their companions slaughtered. Slowly, the Romans began to push back, exploiting the wavering troops, who were distracted by the thought of their plundered camp. Some of the phalangites were looking over their shoulders now, trying to get a view of the horizon behind them. Did they see smoke? Were those cries for help they heard?

You can imagine the Roman legionaries seizing on this, dashing forward in that split-second loss of focus, closing to their lethal distance. Within moments, the phalanx was in real danger again, as gaps opened up that allowed more and more Romans to pour through.

There was nothing for it. Pyrrhus charged in himself, leading what remained of his elite bodyguard, determined to swing the battle back in his favor. That he fought like a lion isn't doubted. Pyrrhus had a long record of personal bravery, and this is supported by the fact that he was badly wounded by a javelin in his arm. Javelins are missile weapons, but they have a fairly short range, around 50 feet, which meant that the king had to be in the thick of the fighting, if not the front line, to get such a wound.

At the same time, his remaining cavalry and elephants finally turned the Roman flank, crashing into the side of their battle line like "*an onrushing billow or a crashing earthquake*," to quote Plutarch. The Romans couldn't hope to hold against the onslaught and were left with an impossible choice, to "*stand their ground only to die in vain, or suffer all that is most grievous without doing any good at all*." I love this quote, because it is a great summation of the decision to stand or flee that I described in chapter I. It's fascinating to see an ancient writer describe the panic response so clearly, and really helps put the reader in the head of the ancient soldier.

In the end, the Romans quit the field, withdrawing in good order back to their camp. It wasn't a rout, as had happened at Heraclea, but they left Pyrrhus in possession of the bloody scrap of ground he'd fought so hard for. It had been another hard contest, and once again, the phalanx was triumphant.

Aftermath

As I said earlier, ancient sources are notorious for grossly exaggerating army sizes and casualty figures, and Asculum is no exception. If we believe Plutarch's mention of a now lost passage of Dionysius, more than 30,000 were slain, which is beyond belief when you consider that is approximately a 50 percent casualty rate on both sides depending on how many soldiers you believe were involved. Frontinus gives equally exaggerated figures, stating that Pyrrhus lost fully half of his army. Plutarch himself gives a much more believable figure, quoting both Pyrrhus' own writing and the turn of the 3rd century BC Thracian general Hieronymus of Cardia, at 6,000 Roman dead and a little more than half that number for Pyrrhus.

Dionysius tells us that things got much worse for Pyrrhus' troops, because their camp had been destroyed. The wounded were left without shelter, and there was no food or even rudimentary supplies like blankets and bandages. Many more died who might have survived if they could have had their wounds treated, or at been least kept fed and warm.

It was a victory for Pyrrhus, but looking at the ruins of his camp, and hearing the pleas of his wounded soldiers, it was hard to see it that way. Plutarch tells us

that at this point, one of Pyrrhus' entourage congratulated him on his success. Pyrrhus surveyed the destruction around him, the broken, unforgiving terrain he had won, still strewn with the corpses of friend and foe alike. "One more such victory," he said, "and we are undone."

The quote became the term "Pyrrhic victory," meaning a win that is so costly, it's just as bad as a loss. We still use this term nearly 2,300 years later.

Unfortunately for Pyrrhus, there was worse to come.



VI

BENEVENTUM, 275 BC: PYRRHUS' LAST GASP

Nay, since he had dared to lay hands on the sacred moneys and to pledge them as a war fund, the divinity brought his intention to naught, in order that he might serve as an example and lesson to all men who should come after him.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*

Pyrrhic victory, or no, Asculum was still a win, and the king of Epirus now had trounced the Romans twice, and sent them running. If he played his cards right, ultimate victory might have been in his grasp.

But then he went and pissed off the gods.

Today, we think of the word “hubris” as plain old pride or arrogance. To the ancient Greeks, it was a much bigger deal, a special kind of crime against the sacred that could invoke Nemesis, the goddess of retribution. We still use the word “nemesis” today to mean “your worst enemy.” Greeks loved hubris and Nemesis stories. The tale of Narcissus, from which we have our modern word for malignant self-love, “narcissism,” is a hubris–Nemesis story. The flight of Icarus is probably the most well-known example of these stories, with the son of Daedalus using wings his father constructed to fly so high that the sun melted the construction and sent him plummeting to his death. The message of the story warns of the consequences of hubris – that humanity should only ever fly so high. Greater heights were the realm of the gods alone.

The best summation of the hubris–Nemesis concept comes from science fiction writer Pierce Brown – “*Rise so high, in mud you lie.*” This is certainly the case with the glorious king Pyrrhus, whose meteoric rise as a king first over lands in Greece and the Balkans, then in Italy, and soon setting his sights on Africa, was every bit the real-world equivalent of Icarus’ mythical flight. It was only natural the gods would take notice, and make him pay.

And that’s why we have to take this narrative, put forth by most of our sources but hammered hardest by Dionysius, with a grain of salt. Pyrrhus’ fall hits the plot points of a Greek hubris story so perfectly that you have to wonder if the facts have been twisted to fit the popular narrative style. Plutarch was writing a book of moral essays as much as a history.

To understand Pyrrhus' fall and Beneventum's place in it, we have to first consider his long road to get there, with Pyrrhus' eyes fixed on Sicily, and the shores of Libya across the Mediterranean Sea.

Fish or Cut Bait: To Sicily and Back Again

Asculum was a bloody nose for Pyrrhus, and he marched his troops back to Tarentum to regroup, rearm and, most importantly, recruit fresh soldiers to replace his considerable losses.

While he recovered, two embassies arrived, each with a unique opportunity. One was from Macedon. Bolgius had led his Gauls (Celts) in an invasion of the Balkans, and the king of Macedon, Ptolemy Keraunos ("Thunderbolt"), had ridden out to meet him. Ptolemy had been thrown from his elephant and the Gauls had cut off his head, parading it around on a spear. Macedon was in trouble. It needed a king and Pyrrhus had ruled it before. Would he come back for a second try?

The other embassy was from the Greek peoples of Sicily. Agathocles, the tyrant who had kept the peace on the island, had been dead for a decade now, and the island was beset by enemies. The two biggest problems were the Carthaginians, the same people who would give us Hannibal and fight the Punic Wars against Rome, and the Mamertines ("Sons of Mars"), a group of Italian mercenaries that Agathocles had brought over from Campania in southern Italy. After Agathocles' city-state of Syracuse made peace with Carthage, these mercenaries had stuck around, and were terrorizing the people they'd fought for.

Seemingly Pyrrhus fell backwards into more opportunities than virtually anyone else in history. Here he was, having been invited to come and rule southern Italy, now being essentially offered rule over two more regions. Both opportunities meant a hard fight. The Gauls weren't going to pick up and leave, and neither would the Mamertines or the Carthaginians, and he only had one army, so Pyrrhus considered which opportunity was better for him.

The Tarentines were, understandably, horrified. They had brought him over from Epirus to defeat the Romans, and here he was, after two victories, considering heading out to fight an entirely different war, leaving a garrison behind. When they complained, asking him to either finish his campaign against Rome, or else depart and leave them to their own defense, he refused to do either. He would depart to pursue his fortune, and be back to Tarentum in his own good time. The soldiers he left behind made them think twice about any reply, and made Meton's point that the Tarentines would regret inviting him seem like a prophecy. It's a good thing to keep in mind. Pyrrhus was a glorious, heroic leader, but he was not altruistic. His conquests were not about Hellenizing the world or creating a better life for his subjects. They were about Pyrrhus and only Pyrrhus.

In the end, Pyrrhus settled on Sicily. Plutarch tells us this decision was driven mostly by his desire to use the island as a jumping-off point for the eventual

conquest of Libya. The Carthaginians were fabulously wealthy from a thriving maritime trade, and it was likely this that influenced Pyrrhus' decision. It was also probably the lure of the new. He'd already been king of Macedon. Africa was a new frontier. It's definitely in character for Pyrrhus, a man high on his own sense of manifest destiny, questing for glory wherever he went.

Initially, he fulfilled that destiny in Sicily. He smashed the Carthaginians, driving them out of every corner of the island save one – the giant fortress of Lilybaeum, modern day Marsala, on the very western tip of the island. Plutarch tells us of the siege of Eryx (modern day Erice), where Pyrrhus, sword in hand, was the first to climb the walls. *“Many were the foes against whom he strove,”* Plutarch says:

Some of them he pushed from the wall on either side and hurled them to the ground, but most he laid dead in heaps about him with the strokes of his sword. He himself suffered no harm, but was a terrible sight for his enemies to look upon, and proved that Homer was right and fully justified in saying that valor, alone of the virtues, often displays transports due to divine possession and frenzy.

This is pure Pyrrhus. Arrogant, brave, bloody-handed and glorious.

And it is this arrogance that proved his undoing, for here begins a long, slow slide to defeat driven mostly by a series of bad decisions.

After great success against Carthage and the Mamertines, Pyrrhus turned his attention to Sicily's western tip.

There's no such thing as an impregnable fortress, but by all accounts Lilybaeum was close. When the Carthaginians offered to let Pyrrhus have all of Sicily if he left Lilybaeum, he probably should have taken the offer. It's not clear why he didn't, but the sources seem to point to pressure from his Sicilian-Greek allies, especially the Syracusans, though Plutarch seems to think it was Pyrrhus' hunger for Libya that made him refuse. Plutarch's explanation is more consistent with what we know of Pyrrhus' personality.

At any rate, he did refuse, and very quickly discovered that he had made a huge mistake. The walls held out, and the city could be supplied by sea, which was controlled by Carthage's massive fleet. When Pyrrhus tried to tax and levy to strengthen his own fleet, resentment against him grew among the Sicilian Greeks. Plutarch tells us that Pyrrhus wasn't kind about his taxes and levies, and *“now he ceased to be a popular leader and became a tyrant, and added to his name for severity a name for ingratitude and faithlessness.”*

As resentment and rebellion against Pyrrhus grew, an embassy arrived from Tarentum. Pyrrhus had been gone for close to three years, and the Romans had reversed most of the gains he'd made in Italy, including the retaking of Heraclea, the site of his first victory in 280 BC. Seeing he was no longer welcome in Sicily, Pyrrhus cut bait yet again, and set sail for Italy once more.

A picture of two Pyrrhuses is emerging here. There's the Pyrrhus that refuses to throw in the towel in battle, digging in and fighting on despite reverses that would make most people surrender. But that is the *tactical* Pyrrhus, focused on the fight he is in the middle of. *Strategic* Pyrrhus, stepping back and looking at

the big picture of his entire war, comes across as impatient and mercurial, cutting and running the moment the going gets even slightly tough. I like this view of Pyrrhus. Like all of us, he's complicated and contradictory, capable of heroism and blunder often within the space of a few breaths.

Decline and Fall

Pyrrhus' streak of bad luck continued in epic fashion. First, he was caught by the Carthaginian navy while sailing back to Italy, and then he was harassed by contingents of Mamertines once he made landfall. Here again, Pyrrhus was suicidally brave, riding back to his army's rear to fight the Mamertines off. Dealt a hideous head-wound, Pyrrhus accepted a challenge to single combat over the objection of his personal guard.

Shaking them off, Plutarch tells us that Pyrrhus rode out to face the Mamertine champion "*full of wrath, smeared with blood, and with a countenance terrible to look upon*" and literally cut the man in half.

Suffering from heavy losses, Pyrrhus arrived in Italy badly mauled, embarrassed and desperately short of money needed to rebuild his army to confront the Romans.

And here we have the crux of the hubris theme in Pyrrhus' story. The city of Locri in southern Italy had a temple to the goddess Persephone, princess of the underworld, which had a well-stocked treasury, probably from years of temple offerings. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark* style, Pyrrhus robbed the temple, with predictable results, at least from an ancient Greek perspective.

After loading up the gold onto his ships, his fleet was smashed by a sudden storm, sinking several ships and killing still more of his men. Dionysius tells us that, heavy as gold is, it somehow managed to wash up on the shores of Locri from where it had been stolen.

Pyrrhus saw this as a sign of divine wrath, that Nemesis was hot on his heels. Dionysius has him remembering the terrible warning from Homer's *Odyssey*, "*The fool, nor wist that she would ne'er give ear – For not so quickly do the deathless gods their purpose change.*" He immediately went to the temple and gave back everything that he had stolen, but the experience had clearly shaken him, and it seems he really believed that he had been marked by the gods. For a man raised on such beliefs, it must have had a powerful impact on his mental state, and one that would come to bear during the battle that followed.

Nemesis Collects – Beneventum

I will use the term "Beneventum" to describe this battle, just because it's in more common use and I don't want readers to get confused if they want to do further research. At the time of the battle, the town was in fact called Maleventum, but the Romans changed it after the battle. In Latin, *male* means "bad" (which we

still have in our words like “malicious” or “malevolent”), and *bene* means “good” (“beneficial,” “beneficent”). The superstitious Romans didn’t want the bad omen of a prefix like *male*. Today, the city is called Benevento and it still sits in Campania on its ancient foundations.

Pyrrhus finally made it back to Tarentum in the spring of 275 BC, and immediately set about rebuilding his army. Seemingly it wasn’t a problem finding more troops, but finding more *good* troops was another matter entirely. The core of Pyrrhus’ phalanx was his Greek and Balkan natives, either citizen-soldiers or mercenaries from Epirus, Macedon and friendly Greek city-states. These were in shorter supply in southern Italy, and his ranks were refilled with weaker militia from Tarentum.

Pyrrhus had no choice but to lean on the Tarentines, because the other city-states of Magna Graecia hadn’t forgotten that he’d abandoned them to the Romans and gone off to better plunder in Sicily. The Samnites were hit the hardest, and were understandably the most resentful and therefore barely supported him at all, despite their common enemy.

Once rested and replenished, Pyrrhus rode out to meet the Romans.

At the time, Rome had two armies in the field under the two consuls for 275 BC. The first, under Lucius Cornelius Lentulus Caudinus, was ravaging Lucania, and the second was in Samnium, under Manius Curius Dentatus. “Dentatus” in this case means “toothy.” Roman *cognomina*, the third of the usual three Roman names, were frequently teasing nicknames, and this name was given because the consul was supposedly born already having teeth.

This presented a problem for Pyrrhus. He felt confident that he could defeat either one of the armies alone, but if they combined, he was much less certain of victory. This may have been due to the quality of his levied troops, or changing attitudes on the part of his former supporters in southern Italy. It may have been that Pyrrhus’ army was smaller than before. It certainly had fewer elephants, as numerous sources report that several were killed over the years since he had first arrived in Italy. This was significant as the elephants had been pivotal in winning both of Pyrrhus’ previous Italian battles. Dionysius says that Pyrrhus had three times the number of soldiers that the enemy had, a claim that, when you consider the proportions of armies in earlier battles from the Pyrrhic War, and other ancient battles overall, strains belief.

We do know that Pyrrhus split his army, sending a contingent to hold up Caudinus and taking his “best men” (according to Plutarch) in the main attack on Dentatus. We don’t know the specific size of the armies involved, but the text implies that Pyrrhus sent a small blocking force with orders to delay Caudinus, and that the bulk of his army marched for Dentatus’ position.

Dentatus had drawn his army up in a fortified position on top of a hill near Maleventum. Once again, the Romans had chosen rugged, broken terrain, which by now they knew would make it difficult to maneuver Pyrrhus’ massive phalanx. The king had managed to overcome this obstacle at Asculum, but that was on relatively open ground. Here, he would be attacking uphill against a dug-in

enemy.

Pyrrhus was not foolish enough to take this bait. Attacking uphill on broken ground would give every advantage to the Romans. There had to be another way.

Those familiar with the story of the Spartan stand at Thermopylae depicted in the movie *300* might remember that when a frontal attack against the Spartans failed, the Persians managed to outflank them with help from the traitor Ephialtes, who showed them a hidden goat path leading around the Spartan position. This is faithful to Herodotus' text, and it's probably true. I can't say for sure that this influenced Pyrrhus at all. I'd be shocked to find he hadn't heard the story. The tale of Leonidas' brave stand was a legend even then, over two centuries after the Spartan king fell.

Whether Ephialtes' treachery was Pyrrhus' inspiration or not, he tried the same tactic, bringing a strong force of his troops on a night march up a track through the woods that would bring them up above and behind the Roman position. Meanwhile, the bulk of the army waited on the plain below. When they heard the sound of the flanking force's trumpets, they would attack together from front and rear, above and below, crushing the Romans between them.

It was, on paper, a solid plan. Pyrrhus wasn't risking a frontal assault that would give his enemy a major advantage, and neither was he quitting the battlefield, which would undoubtedly make him look cowardly and sap his soldiers' morale. We can't be sure why it went awry, only that it did, and badly. A Greek or Macedonian from the period might tell you that it was the work of Nemesis, visiting retribution on Pyrrhus for his violation of the temple at Locri. There's some evidence to suggest that Pyrrhus certainly thought this was the case. Dionysius tells us that Pyrrhus dreamed his teeth fell out the night of the attack, an omen that Dionysius sees as evidence of divine disfavor.

Whatever the reason, the flanking force got hopelessly lost in the thickly forested hills. Following an overgrown track in the dark is hard enough by yourself with an electric flashlight. Try getting thousands of people wearing armor, lugging heavy weapons and navigating by torchlight, all while trying to keep horses, pack animals and even elephants quiet and calm. The troops might have had local guides, and given the resentment we know the Samnites held toward Pyrrhus, it's possible they could have had their revenge leading Pyrrhus' troops astray.

We can guess that the troops waiting at the base of the hill gritted their teeth with growing impatience as the hours of darkness ticked by, with no sight of torches and no sound of trumpets. Up on the track, contingents of soldiers wandered off in the dark and were hopelessly lost; others lost patience with the column's progress and tried to find the path on their own. The confusion was total. Eventually, the torches the flanking force were using guttered out, and the thick tree cover kept any starlight from helping them find their way.

And so the flanking force would have tramped through the woods in search of the goat path, and the main army would have waited for them on the plain. The sources don't discuss this, but I can't help but think that those precious hours

could have been used for sleeping. The troops were expecting the flanking force to arrive and force a night action. In discussing preoperational jitters with my former and current military friends, all of us agree that we can almost never sleep when we know an operation is imminent. For me, at least, the nerves calmed when I was finally into the action, but right before it my stomach always churned and I lost all fatigue and all appetite. This is important to note. It may be that this delay, in addition to yielding the element of surprise, meant that the Romans, themselves sleeping soundly in ignorance of Pyrrhus' night movement, confronted a sleepless and hungry Pyrrhic army.

It wasn't until the first shreds of dawn that Pyrrhus' scouts were able to locate the trail and get the flanking force back on track. It was in the light of day that the force marched into view above the Roman camp, plainly visible, all hope of surprise lost. Pyrrhus' troops had marched all night and emerged exhausted and demoralized, hungry and thirsty.

The Romans, on the other hand, had enjoyed a restful night. They had posted regular watches, but the men slept well in the security of their fortified camp, knowing that the sentries would sound the alarm if Pyrrhus attempted anything. We can also assume they'd been fed and had plenty to drink.

And now they sprang into action, signal trumpets sounding. From his vantage on the heights, Pyrrhus could probably have seen the centurions laying about themselves with their vine rods, herding their troops into their lines, men scrambling to don helmets and strap on greaves.

For the life of me, I don't understand why Pyrrhus didn't wave off. Granted, he would be attacking downhill, but with a small, demoralized and exhausted force against a dug-in, well-rested and utterly unsurprised enemy. It might have been that he feared his men might abandon him if he showed fear. There was probably an element of pride, a desire to restore his reputation after the string of setbacks that had dogged him since he'd failed to take Lilybaeum. Some of it was likely Pyrrhus' deep-seated belief in his own majesty and power. All are possible.

Whatever his reasons, Pyrrhus ordered the advance, and it immediately became apparent he had made a terrible mistake. His phalanx, tired and demoralized, made a ragged line, riddled with fatal gaps. The Romans, probably amazed by the king's suicidal bravery, marched out to meet him.

If the phalanx wasn't ragged enough to begin with, it soon got worse, as Roman javelins began to make themselves felt in the front ranks, ripping through shields, helmets and body armor, forcing men to throw their shields down or let them hang from their straps, useless without an arm to steady them. Worst would have been the phalangites struck down by missile fire, collapsing in the middle of their *lochoi*, crying out for help. Their comrades, battle-brothers who had camped and fought beside them, who had shared hardship and danger and the hope of riches and glory, would have been forced to ignore them as their officers shouted at the *lochos* to close up, to keep the line tight, desperate to avoid the kind of gaps that would spell their doom when the legionaries finally closed. In many cases, the men would have had to march over comrades, vainly trying to

avoid them. Would some of them have used their “lizard-killers” to grant mercy to friends who were beyond hope?

We can also guess what happened next. The skirmishers, having done what damage they could, would have cleared the field, fading back into the gaps created by the checkerboard deployment of the legionary maniples. Then, the *hastati* would have thrown their two javelins, drawn swords, and rushed in.

The phalangites, already softened up by the skirmishers, would have been further weakened by this final barrage of javelins. Now, hopelessly disordered and barely clinging to cohesion, they’d find themselves in the legionary’s deadly embrace. Tired, wounded and terrified, the phalangite would have had trouble mustering the speed and ferocity to get his smaller round shield up in time to block the powerful, metal-encased punch the legionary would have delivered. The *hastati* were young, with all the speed and strength of youth, and they added all that to their shield’s 20 pounds of weight, slamming the phalangites backward.

Earlier I quoted Polybius’ statement that phalangites only had around 3 feet between them, which meant that they would soon have been tripping and falling over one another, fouling one another’s weapons and spreading further chaos. Into this confusion waded the triumphant legionaries, punching with the shield, then following up with the short, stabbing sword, cutting the phalangites down.

Pyrrhus could only have felt the sick touch of despair twisting in his gut, Nemesis’ hand on his shoulder, revenge for the gold he had stolen. It was already over, all order evaporating, his troops dispersing and fleeing like dandelion seeds blown on a breeze.

But this was Pyrrhus of Epirus, the man who had ruled many kingdoms, who, though he had lost them, never counted himself out. This wasn’t Pyrrhus looking at an entire war that was going badly. This was the *tactical* Pyrrhus. Pyrrhus in a single battle. He wasn’t about to give in.

There is a single attribute prized above all others in modern military operators. It is the thing that separates SEALs from sailors, SWAT responders from street cops. It’s not equipment or training or *esprit de corps*. It’s heart. It’s a refusal to surrender, an unwillingness to give up. I’m reminded of Petty Officer 2nd Class Matthew “Axe” Axelson, who, despite suffering multiple gunshot wounds to the chest and head during Operation *Red Wings* in Afghanistan, kept on fighting. He absolutely refused to lie down and die, long after anyone else would have quit. It is this spirit that separates great warriors from the rest.

Every ancient source on this tactical side of Pyrrhus depicts him in the same way. This was a man who didn’t give up, even when he believed a malevolent deity had it in for him.

He didn’t give up now. He signaled the elephants he’d brought with him to swing out from behind the disintegrating phalanx and charge. It was a mad, desperate move, but keep in mind that his elephants had brought him victory at both Heraclea and Asculum, so it wasn’t beyond possibility that they could turn things around here.

Unfortunately for Pyrrhus, the Romans had learned from their experience in those two battles. It's not clear if they had skirmishers ready for the elephants, or if the legionaries had saved javelins for this possibility. Perhaps the *hastati* were engaged with the phalanx, and the *principes* still had their javelins? We do know that the Romans unleashed a barrage of missile fire against the elephants.

This had happened before, but both Cassius Dio and Dionysius agree that this time, things went horribly wrong when the missiles found one of the younger elephants.

It's impossible to know how Atlas elephants behaved, if Pyrrhus was indeed using Atlas elephants at Beneventum. This species has been extinct since long before the advent of modern zoological study. But we do know that modern elephants generally form into matriarchal "bond groups" consisting of several elephant families. The matriarchy in elephant groups typically follows the same rule as in human queendoms, with the eldest daughter taking over for a deceased matriarch even if her older sister is present. Whether this behavior had any influence on events at Beneventum is unknown, but Cassius Dio and Dionysius both tell us that one of the younger elephants was wounded by javelins, and ran around crying for its mother. The sources aren't clear as to whether or not Pyrrhus had an actual baby elephant running in his battle group, or a "young bull," perhaps of "bachelor pod" age around 10–17 years old. This would make it young enough still to have an attachment to its mother and aunts, but possibly large enough to see service in Pyrrhus' army.

However old this elephant happened to be, the matriarch had a violent reaction to its being wounded. This fury spread like a virus through the rest of the group who stampeded, trampling friend and foe alike. The elephants turned, racing back through the tightly packed ranks of the phalangites, and what little shreds of order remained were crushed under their enormous feet. All became a panicked mass of fleeing soldiers, horses and elephants.

The Romans were not fools. They knew how incredibly valuable the elephants were, and Dionysius tells us they herded eight of them into a boxed-in area from which there was no escape, until their handlers surrendered and they were captured alive.

Seeing that all was lost on the heights, Pyrrhus at last turned his attention to the hill's base, where the bulk of his army, albeit the less expert portion, would only now be beginning their tired slog up the hill. The troops would have spent all night nervously awaiting the signal to attack, and lost valuable sleep as a result. They would have been sluggish and surly, and Pyrrhus likely watched in horror as the Romans turned from the pursuit of his broken flanking force and turned to sweep down the hill to meet them.

Without strong leadership, his men would not have a chance. I picture Pyrrhus kicking his horse's flanks and racing down the hill to his army, shouting at them not to give up hope.

Keep in mind that no one – Cassius Dio, Plutarch or Dionysius – describes the battle as a pincer movement, with a flanking force attacking from the heights while the main force remained ready at the bottom. But as with so many other things in ancient history, we're left having to fill in the blanks with our best guesses. This is mine: a small flanking force composed of your best troops and "strongest elephants" (Plutarch's words) attacking from the heights isn't going to do you much good unless you can draw the enemy's attention elsewhere. And if the sole attack was from the heights, then why would you even need to take just your best men and elephants? This maneuver only makes sense if we view it in the context of a pincer movement between this smaller, elite force and the main force, which awaited the signal to attack from the plain below. I'm proceeding based on this admittedly large presumption.

Pyrrhus managed to outpace the Roman force, and reached his men just as the phalanx was firming up, lowering pikes and bracing for the Roman onslaught. The legionaries had the bit between their teeth now, racing down the hill, flush with the victory over the flanking force. They had that most critical factor in ancient warfare – momentum. Even worse, they were attacking down a slope, which meant greater reach for their javelins, as well as greater impact when they finally went shield to shield with their enemy.

Pyrrhus would have called on his men to take heart, riding up and down the line, showing his soldiers he was with them. I can't imagine it did much good. His Epirote, Greek and Macedonian troops had seen him fail in Sicily, and his Magna Graecia allied troops were openly resentful. Worse, they had all just seen the failure of his grand plan, first in the long hours of sleepless waiting, and now in the horrific slaughter at the top of the hill.

Still, to flee now would mean certain death. They would be turning their backs on a force that was running downhill. The only hope Pyrrhus' army would have had was to stand and fight. The phalanx was, first and foremost, a defensive formation, and they would have need of defense soon enough.

The first cloud of javelins would have showered the phalangites, but they managed to hold firm as the *hastati* raised their war cry, drowned by the deafening clash of the lowered pike heads colliding with their huge shields. His best troops, the Epirotes, Macedonians and mercenary Greeks, would as ever have been stationed on the right, in the place of honor, with the allies on the left. His left flank would have been driven back at first, with the right, presumably where Pyrrhus fell in, holding the line.

Pyrrhus had lost the elephants he'd sent out with the flanking force, but he still had a few left, and he would have relied on them to save the situation, sending them around the flank to crash into the Roman line. And as with the heights, the Romans had learned from Asculum, driving the giant creatures back with clouds of thrown javelins, sending them trumpeting madly to the rear, the Pyrrhic forces scattering to avoid being trampled by their own.

At last, Pyrrhus' battered, exhausted men could take no more, and the king saw that the only way to prevent the kind of rout he'd inflicted on the Romans at

Heraclea was to sound an orderly retreat.

Aftermath

If we have learned nothing else of Pyrrhus over the past three chapters, it's that he was incredibly proud. Though he'd known his share of defeat in life, I can't imagine that admitting defeat at Beneventum could have been easy on him. But it couldn't be denied that the battle had ended in disaster.

The sources don't depict a rout, but the casualty figures must have been extreme. Plutarch, whose casualty figures are the most consistently believable, tells us that by the time Pyrrhus returned to Epirus, he had just 8,000 infantry and 500 cavalry with him. No mention of any surviving elephants is made.

And yes, Pyrrhus did quit Italy after Beneventum, joining the ranks of Archidamus III, Alexander I and Cleonymus as a Hellenistic ruler who had been invited in by Tarentum, failed to conquer and either died, or departed in defeat. Following his earlier abandonment of Sicily, we confirm our earlier impression of Pyrrhus: die-hard and resolved in an individual battle, but lacking the patience to last over a long campaign. He would fight like a lion to win at the tactical level, then quit the war at the first strategic defeat. Indeed, Plutarch reaches this exact conclusion, quoting probably Antigonos II Gonatas, grandson of Alexander the Great's famous general Antigonos One-Eyed, who said that Pyrrhus was like "*... a player with dice who makes many fine throws but does not understand how to use them when they are made.*" *Pyrrhus was a master of the small picture, but he had absolutely no grasp on the big one.*

This wasn't the end of Pyrrhus. He had another three years of adventures before meeting his death in a fashion that the most remotely superstitious Greek would see as the clear hand of Nemesis. Pyrrhus returned to Epirus broke, but was almost immediately at war again, this time with Antigonos II Gonatas, from whom he seized the Macedonian throne after his victory at the Battle of the Aous river in 274 BC. We're not covering that battle here since it didn't involve a legion, and was a phalanx versus phalanx fight, with the addition of Gallic warbands on Pyrrhus' side.

No sooner was he installed as king of Macedon, then Pyrrhus was off and running to the next fight, assisting the Spartan Cleonymus in his bid to take the Spartan throne. Yes, the same Cleonymus who had been invited in by Tarentum and then driven out of Italy. Pyrrhus failed to secure the throne for Cleonymus, due in part to the ferocity of the Spartan women, who fought in the city's defense.

Nemesis' divine hand in the tragic story becomes even more evident here. As Pyrrhus, beaten, retreated from Sparta, his rearguard was attacked by a Spartan force under a man named Eucalus. Pyrrhus drew his main army away, but sent his firstborn son Ptolemy back at the head of a picked force to drive the Spartans off. Eucalus had a Cretan under his command named Oryssus, who got a sidelong shot in on Ptolemy, killing him.

The Spartan force blasted through Pyrrhus' rearguard, but were so eager in their pursuit that they rushed out into open ground where they could be surrounded by Pyrrhus' main body of troops just as the king received word that his eldest son was dead. It's safe to say that Pyrrhus was a ferocious fighter even on an off day, but Plutarch is at pains to tell us that this time was special. Pyrrhus led his picked cavalry in a charge against Eucalus. In a scene befitting an action movie, the Spartan warrior faced him fearlessly, dodging Pyrrhus' charging horse at the last instant, aiming a precise cut that would have severed Pyrrhus' steering hand, the one holding the horse's reins. Eucalus missed by inches, cutting the rein instead of the wrist, and Pyrrhus ran him through with his spear, which stuck fast, pulling him off his horse. Pyrrhus freed the weapon, stepped over Eucalus' corpse and waded into the Spartans. The results of the battle are best summed up by Plutarch, who simply states that Pyrrhus "... *sated himself with Spartan blood.*"

The pattern of Pyrrhus pulling stakes the moment he met with defeat continued. After being repulsed from Sparta, he gave up and headed for Argos, where he was invited to intervene in a dispute. One faction had called on Antigonus II, so it was only natural that the other wanted his rival Pyrrhus. Pyrrhus, faced with a slog in Sparta or new pastures in Argos, made the obvious choice to anyone familiar with Pyrrhus.

And finally, Nemesis had her due. While fighting in the heart of the city, Pyrrhus was speared by an Argive soldier. The wound wasn't bad, and Pyrrhus turned to kill the holder of the spear. The Argive's mother was on the roof of a building watching the fighting, and seeing Pyrrhus about to kill her son, she ripped off a roof tile and threw it at him. The tile struck the king at the base of his neck, stunning him long enough for the Argives to drag him into a building and cut off his head.

Cassius Dio tells us that an old woman, trying to get a better view of the fighting, overbalanced and fell off the roof, landing on Pyrrhus and killing him. Both stories can't be true, but I definitely like the one of the angry mother rescuing her son with a thrown roof tile better. Either way, it was a sad end to an electric figure.



Pyrrhus had, for a time, challenged the might of Rome and won. The phalanx had stood strong and won two battles against the legion. It had lost the third, but was this a one-off, or the beginning of a trend? To answer this question, we'll need to skip forward 78 years to the next great legion versus phalanx battle – far from Italy this time, in the far-flung reaches of northern Greece, at a ridge of hills known to shepherds for their likeness to the heads of dogs, which gave them their name: "dogs' heads," or in Greek, Cynoscephalae.



VII

CYNOSCEPHALAE, 197 BC: THE LEGION TRIUMPHANT

It was only a cavalry skirmish in which they engaged, for the ground was not suitable for a battle on a larger scale; hence both withdrew. And having reached a certain hill, the top ridge of which is called “Dogs’ Heads,” they encamped, one on one side, the other on the other.

Cassius Dio, *Roman History*

We have to move forward 78 years to the next major engagement where the Roman legion fought the Hellenistic phalanx. Where the Romans squared off against the Epirotes in the last three chapters, they would now fight against Pyrrhus’ on again, off again enemy, the Antigonids. In order to properly understand the context for this battle, you’ll need to know who the major players were, and how the fighting started.

The background to the Macedonian wars is incredibly intricate and complicated, with all of the betrayal and drama that make series like *Game of Thrones* so popular.

As outlined at the start of this book, when Alexander the Great died in 323 BC, his squabbling generals carved up his empire, setting up dynasties of their own. These dynasties were known as the *diadochi* or “successors,” and while they initially professed unity and loyalty to Alexander’s vision, they quickly fell to infighting. The three main successor dynasties, the Antigonids, Seleucids and Ptolemaics, were each named for the generals who founded them (Antigonos, Seleucus and Ptolemy) and their ascendancy ushered in a period of intense intrigue and constant civil war. These “Wars of the *Diadochi*” or “Successor Wars” spanned roughly 322 to 275 BC, the same year that Pyrrhus was defeated at Beneventum. The fighting raged across all of Alexander’s old empire, from Greece in the west to the fringes of India in the east. It was in this hotbed of conflict that the Hellenistic phalanx developed, usually facing off against other Hellenistic phalanxes.

Throughout this period, Rome was still focused on developing its dominion

over Italy. It wasn't yet ready to turn its eyes east, and so was largely absent from this theater of war. It wasn't until the Successor Wars had mostly burned themselves out that Roman expansion eastward brought the Romans into conflict. From 214 to 148 BC, Rome fought four separate wars against the Antigonids, and one against the Seleucids. All were ultimate victories for Rome, and resulted in complete Roman domination of Alexander's hard-fought domain.

Cynoscephalae was the decisive battle of the Second Macedonian War, which raged from 200 to 197 BC between Rome and the Antigonids, the dynasty originally founded by the famous Antigonus I Monophthalmus (Antigonus "One-Eye," who had, indeed, lost an eye fighting against the Persians). A fierce and ruthless general, Antigonus was killed at the age of 81, while fighting at the Battle of Ipsus in 301 BC, a successor battle fought between the Antigonids on one side, and a coalition of successors including the Seleucids on the other.

At the time of his death, Antigonus' kingdom covered much of what is now modern day Turkey and the Levant. It was left to his son, Demetrius I Poliorcetes ("the Besieger"), to retake Macedon, Alexander's home and the heart of his original empire. For the next 127 years, the Antigonids were a thorn in Rome's side.

Demetrius' son was Antigonus II Gonatas, whom we saw fighting with Pyrrhus in Greece. His great-grandson was Philip V, and he was one of the main belligerents at Cynoscephalae, the most significant battle of what we now call the Second Macedonian War.

The Second Macedonian War

Philip was, by all accounts, brave and passionate. A fierce warrior, nicknamed "beloved of the Hellenes" as a testament to his generosity. That said, he was still a Hellenistic king, and that meant he could also be entitled, cruel and unconcerned with the plight of the common Greek. There's also some evidence in Livy that he was more than a little paranoid. Some of this is to be expected in an ancient king, as they always had their fair share of enemies, but Livy is at pains to point out that Philip not only feared "*the constant pressure of the enemy by land and sea; he also had misgivings about the loyalty of his allies; and even, at times, of his own countrymen.*"

Keep in mind that Alexander the Great's empire included Greece, and Philip V most certainly saw himself as Alexander's right and legitimate successor. Greece was, for Philip, the logical extension of the Antigonid Empire, if not in fact of direct control, then at least in terms of its sphere of influence. This included Illyria, which in turn includes the western Balkans covering much of modern day Croatia, and Thrace.

One of the Illyrian tribes, the Ardiaei, came under the rule of Queen Teuta in 231 BC, on the death of her husband, King Agron. Teuta was technically regent for her stepson Pinnes, but that didn't stop her from leading the Ardiaei on a campaign of piracy that was so successful that merchants began appealing to

Rome for help. When Rome sent two envoys to tell her to stop, Teuta, furious at the disrespect, had one of them killed and took the other one captive.

Rome, unsurprisingly, declared war, and in 228 BC, they succeeded in removing Illyrian garrisons from a number of Greek cities and installing their own client king, Demetrius of Pharos, as ruler.

However, Philip V considered Illyria to be in his sphere of influence. He was furious about Roman intervention there, and probably deeply troubled about what this could mean for his own kingdom. If the Romans could steamroll Illyria in just a couple of years, who knew what they could do to him?

Meanwhile, Demetrius was turning out to be a lousy client king. He expanded Illyrian power, and drew ever closer to the Antigonids. Eventually, he started up the pirate raids again, and allied with the Histri, another Illyrian tribe who had also been pirating Roman supply ships. Rome had to go into Illyria yet again to set things right, and the Second Illyrian War concluded with Demetrius' defeat in 219 BC at the hands of Lucius Aemilius Paullus, the father of Lucius Aemilius Paullus Macedonicus, the Roman commander at Pydna whom we'll read about in chapter IX.

Demetrius fled to the court of Philip V, where he became the Antigonid king's trusted advisor. The Romans, naturally, demanded that he be turned over to them. Philip refused, and relations between the two powers soured.

At the time, Philip was engaged in the Social War, a struggle for dominance in Greece between Philip's Hellenic League, a collection of Greek city-states under Philip, and the Aetolian League, another collection of Greek city-states centered on Aetolia, a region in central Greece, along with Sparta.

Also at this time, Rome was embroiled in a war of its own, one it was losing badly. In 217 BC, Carthaginian forces under the great general Hannibal Barca crushed the Romans at Lake Trasimene in northern Italy. Following on the heels of another stunning defeat at Trebia the previous year, the Second Punic War looked increasingly desperate for Rome.

Demetrius seized on this, advising Philip to strike while the iron was hot. Polybius quotes Demetrius, to Philip: *"Italy, and your crossing into it, is the first step in the acquiring of universal empire, to which no one has a better claim than yourself. And now is the moment to act when the Romans have suffered a reverse."*

Philip wrapped up the Social War with the Peace of Naupactus that same year, and turned his attention to Illyria. He marched northwest, and began the subjugation of the region, worrying Rome's allies.

And then came Cannae.

In the summer of 216 BC, Hannibal inflicted one of the greatest defeats in recorded history on the Romans, effectively wiping out their entire army. Estimates of Roman casualties at Cannae range as high as 75,000 dead and 10,000 taken prisoner. As Hannibal's troops looted the corpses of the slain, no one could be blamed for thinking that Rome's days as a power in the Mediterranean were over.

This is certainly what Philip thought, and so he sent an embassy to Hannibal

to propose an alliance. This alliance was concluded in 215 BC, and it turned out to be one of the biggest mistakes of Philip's life. For, in allying with Hannibal, he made an enduring enemy out of Rome, and it would never truly forgive him for the slight.

This led to the First Macedonian War, fought from 214 to 205 BC, which was really more of a series of blockades and skirmishes fought mostly in Greece and the Balkans that ended in a stalemate. Joining the Romans were Philip's old enemies the Aetolians and King Attalus I of Pergamon, a kingdom that existed in what is now western Turkey. Through a combination of skillful generalship and Rome's incredible ability to generate military manpower, Rome was miraculously able to turn the tables and actually win the Second Punic War in 201 BC. But prior to its victory, Rome wasn't really able to focus on Philip, or else the results of the First Macedonian War might have been very different. Rome appears to have been less concerned with defeating Philip, and more with preventing him from sending aid to Hannibal, who was its real problem.

The next year, King Ptolemy IV Philopator ("Father-loving") died, leaving his throne to his six-year old son, Ptolemy V Epiphanes ("God-in-flesh"). Ptolemy V was the great-great-grandson of Ptolemy I Soter ("Savior"), one of Alexander's generals and one of the original successors. By the time Ptolemy V was crowned, the Ptolemaic dynasty's dominions consisted mostly of Egypt but also stretched into Turkey. Seeing an opportunity, Philip met with Antiochus III (Antiochus the Great), the king of the Seleucid Empire. The two signed a secret pact agreeing to divide Ptolemy's territory between them.

In 201 BC, Philip invaded the fringes of Ptolemy's territory, attacking cities in western Turkey. The Roman allied kingdoms of Pergamon and Rhodes were greatly alarmed by Philip's expansion, which they saw as competing with their own interests in the region, and they appealed to Rome for help. At the same time, war had broken out between Athens and Macedon. At last, Rome issued Philip an ultimatum not to attack any of Ptolemy's territories. It also told him to leave Greece alone, and in particular Rome's allies, which included Athens. Philip refused, and the Second Macedonian War erupted.

Rome assigned the consul Publius Sulpicius Galba to lead the effort. Galba had fought without great distinction in the First Macedonian War, and he continued his lackluster performance in the second, only succeeding in a few skirmishes which left Philip no more likely to abandon his efforts than before. In 198 BC, Galba was replaced by Publius Villius Tappulus. Plutarch is critical of both men, accusing them of being overly cautious and wasting time in Rome when they should have been getting on with the war.

Things went even worse for Villius, who found himself with a mutiny on his hands. Two thousand veterans of the Second Punic War, likely men who had survived the disaster at Cannae and had gone on to Africa to defeat the Carthaginians on their home soil, felt they had been away from Italy for too long, and couldn't take care of their own farms and families. The details of this mutiny aren't known, but it is clear that morale in the Roman expeditionary

force was low, and that Villius had neither the respect of, nor control over, his soldiers.

The Second Macedonian War was on course to be the same frustrating stalemate as the first. If Rome was to thwart Philip's ambitions, it would need a hero.

Fortunately for the Romans, a hero was on his way.

“He won a good name” Titus Quinctius Flamininus

The story of Titus Quinctius Flamininus is remarkably similar to that of the great Scipio Africanus. Both men were exactly the heroes their country needed at a time when the prospect of victory seemed impossible. Granted, the stakes were higher in the Second Punic War, with Rome fighting for its very existence, but the sheer timeliness of their appearance is worth noting. Both men were made consuls despite being below the legal age limit for the position, and without properly following the path of the *cursus honorum*.

Plutarch describes Flamininus as a passionate character, quick to anger and extremely generous, though Plutarch makes it sound like this generosity was driven more by ambition than a genuine desire to help:

... since he was covetous of honor and fame, he desired that his noblest and greatest achievements should be the result of his own efforts, and he took more pleasure in those who wanted to receive kindness than in those who were able to bestow it, considering that the former were objects upon which he could exercise his virtue, while the latter were his rivals, so to speak, in the struggle for fame.

A self-proclaimed philhellene (lover of all things Greek), he probably spoke and wrote the language well.

It's ironic that Flamininus was appointed governor of Tarentum, the region that had invited Pyrrhus to assist it against Rome nearly a century earlier. By all accounts he did a fine job, and his success here and in later positions saw him elected to the consulship by a vote in the senate, overruling opposition from two tribunes who argued it was unlawful due to his youth and his failure to hold to the proper offices on his way up. The senate's approval of Flamininus to take the consulship, in spite of real opposition backed by the power of law, gives us an indication that Flamininus was either supremely confident and incredibly charismatic, or else well connected politically, all of which were assets that would serve any Roman general well.

He certainly did not disappoint. Sent to revive the flagging war against Philip, Flamininus ignored the normal period of honors and administrative duties a consul would perform in Rome, and unlike Galba or Villius, immediately set out for Epirus, taking with him 3,000 veterans from Scipio's army, crack troops hardened from long and difficult service, with high morale owing to their ultimate victory in the Second Punic War.

He then marched to relieve Villius of command. Villius was just five miles

away from Philip, who was dug into an excellent defensive position over the Aous river gorge in modern day Albania, blocking the best route into Macedon.

Having taken command from Villius, Flaminius sent an envoy to negotiate with Philip. By now, Philip had realized that he had the Romans' full attention. They were done with the Punic War and able to concentrate their full power against him. So Philip offered peace terms. He would cease to attack Greece and withdraw from the cities he had conquered outside his original territory.

Flaminius rejected this generous offer, and instead proclaimed that his mission wasn't merely to stop Philip's aggression, but to liberate all the Greeks; he therefore demanded that Philip should also withdraw from Thessaly, a region that had been considered part of the kingdom of Macedon since the time of Alexander. This was likely designed to deliberately provoke the king, and it worked, for Philip broke off negotiations and returned to his excellent position defending the gorge.

A local Epirote noble named Charops acted as a guide for Flaminius, leading 4,300 Romans on a flank march to attack Philip from the rear, while the main Roman force distracted him in a series of skirmishes and missile duels. The tactic might have ended the war right then and there, but Philip noticed the flanking force's signal fire, and was able to flee just as the trap was sprung.

Philip lost his vital baggage, including the personal wealth of his soldiers, probably many of their families, and, according to Plutarch, about 2,000 men, but only because the rough terrain made it impossible to pursue them. But far more importantly than that to the outcome of the war, he lost the allegiance of the Greeks.

The city-states of Greece were mostly adopting a wait-and-see approach to the war, careful not to ally with either Rome or Philip, for fear that they would reap a whirlwind if the other side won. Flaminius had set out to win their allegiance, and Plutarch points out that he was careful to keep his troops from plundering as they marched through the countryside, something Philip hadn't bothered to do. This obviously garnered goodwill from the Greeks, which Flaminius needed if he was to be successful.

The victory at the Aous river was the final proof the wavering Greeks needed to switch allegiances. Many cities came over to the Romans, including the all-important Achaean League, making the countryside suddenly hostile to Philip and his army. Flaminius' negotiations with Philip had gone public, possibly deliberately, and word was spreading that the Roman consul was in Greece not to conquer the place, but to liberate the people from the yoke of the Antigonids.

Philip must have realized he was in trouble after the defeat at the Aous and the political shift in Greece, and he sent an embassy to the senate in Rome, most likely to beg clemency and peace terms. Flaminius sent his own envoys racing ahead. He was worried he would lose the glory of defeating Philip in a pitched, decisive battle. At the very least, he wanted the authority to negotiate peace terms himself, and therefore get the credit for winning the Second Macedonian War. Plutarch points out that, like Pyrrhus, Flaminius was something of a glory-

hound.

Flaminius must have greased the right palms, because word arrived from the senate that his command had been extended, and he wasted no time getting his troops on the march to bring the Antigonid king to battle. It was to be another major clash between the legion and the phalanx, the first test, post-Pyrrhus, between these two distinct formations.

Dogs' Heads in Mist: Cynoscephalae, 197 BC

The Battle of Cynoscephalae is a study in chaos. It was an intensely jumbled and confused event, and that makes it a fascinating look into how the legion and the phalanx performed under less than ideal circumstances. The real test of efficacy isn't how a formation performs as designed, but how it works when it's put under unexpected stress.

Even better, Cynoscephalae is comparatively well sourced, with decent detail from Livy, Plutarch, Cassius Dio and Polybius, although we still take these sources with a grain of salt. "Well sourced" in ancient history is still sparse by modern standards, but there's considerably less guessing involved in this battle than in the ones we've looked at previously.

The fact is, neither side wanted the fight, nor were they prepared. Both commanders would have preferred different ground for a battle, at a time of their choosing. Unfortunately, circumstances conspired to make this impossible. We begin with Flaminius, pressing forward with his army, hoping to intercept Philip at Pherae, a town in southeastern Thessaly, where Philip was foraging for food.

Keep in mind that feeding an ancient army was no mean feat. It's generally believed that Philip had upwards of 25,000 men with him at Cynoscephalae, and that doesn't count horses and pack animals. An army on the march needed thousands of tons of food every day, most of which couldn't be carried with them. And this doesn't even count the needs of the substantial baggage train. Some armies would drive "meat-on-the-hoof," herds of livestock that would march with the armies and could be slaughtered and eaten on an as-needed basis, but supply was a constant problem. Armies could never march too far from a good source of water, and substantial energy was dedicated to foraging.

Foraging consisted of sending out parties of soldiers to beg, borrow or steal (and often all three) needed supplies. Many soldiers found themselves doing double duty as farmers, reaping ripe fields and bringing the grain back to the army, including all the related labor – threshing, hulling, sorting, grinding and baking. Others might gather nuts and berries, hunt or trap animals, or raid developed farms, pastures and orchards for whatever they had. You often hear of the most disciplined armies ruthlessly plundering the land they marched through, even though it belonged to friends and allies. In many of these cases, the marching armies had no choice. They could either disband, starve or steal from their friends.

Foraging was a risky business. Ancient armies depended on mass cohesion, large groups of men working together for mutual defense. Foraging was, by necessity, small groups of people spreading out over a wide range of territory looking for food. This made them vulnerable to being picked off by enemy units. The constant problem of the need to forage, while still maintaining good relations with the civilians in the foraging area, along with the need to defend the foragers, was a major factor in ancient warfare, and one that will play a special role in this battle.

Polybius tells us Philip didn't find good forage in Phrae, and so he set off for Scotussa, where the corn harvest looked as if it might provide him with a good food supply. Flamininus somehow "*divined his intention*" and marched to intercept him.

Dumb luck, or divine intervention if you want to think like a person of the ancient world, had it that both armies wound up marching on either side of a long ridge of hills known, presumably for their shape, as "Dogs' Heads" (Cynoscephalae). I traveled to the site of the battle, and examined the ridge in question. I certainly didn't see this shape, and 2,200 years is not a lot of time in geological terms, but I'll trust that the ancient people who gave the hills their name saw the shape they describe. Both armies encamped, Philip at Melabium in the territory of Scotussa, and Flamininus at the temple of the goddess of water, Thetis, in Pharsalus, known today as Farsala.

Though just a few miles away from one another, they were completely ignorant of one another's presence. This wasn't helped by a storm that blew in that night, leaving the ground wet and cloaking the entire landscape in fog so thick that it was difficult, in Polybius' words, to "*see even those who were quite close.*"

Philip set off that morning, but finding the broken ground and thick fog made it impossible to tell if he was marching in the right direction, he sent skirmishers to the top of the ridgeline to get a view of the land from high ground. Flamininus had a similar idea, and sent out ten cavalry squadrons and 1,000 skirmishers (probably *velites*) with the same goal – get up on the ridge and see what they could see. The ridge was the highest point on the battlefield, so it made sense that both scouting parties headed to the same spot.

It wasn't long before these two scouting parties bumped into each other. You can imagine the shock, as both groups froze, waiting for their bodies to register what their eyes were seeing, and then javelins began to fly and shouts echoed off the ridge top as battle was joined.

Blundering into Battle

We have clearer information on the makeup of the armies at Cynoscephalae than for previous battles. Flamininus had 20,000 legionaries, probably two legions and their allied troops. He had another 2,000 light infantry, though it isn't clear if we're referring to Roman skirmishers here or allied troops. He had 2,500 cavalry,

and again we can't be sure how many of these were Roman and how many auxiliaries. Most importantly, he had 20 war elephants of his own, showing that Rome had learned from its wars against Pyrrhus and Hannibal, both of whom used these creatures extensively, and with mixed results. I'm not sure if these are counted as part of the allied contingent attached to the legions, or if they were separate, but the sources tell us that Flaminius also had a force of 1,200 light infantry from the Epirote tribe of the Athamanes, and 800 archers from Crete and Apollonia (in Illyria). He also had 6,000 infantry and 400 cavalry provided by the Aetolians, who had by this time developed a reputation for horsemanship that rivaled the Thessalians.

If Rome had one superpower, it was its unrivaled ability to produce troops. There's a great line from Plutarch's *Life of Pyrrhus* where Cineas, having observed the Romans during an embassy, warns the king that "... *he was afraid it might prove to be a Lernaean hydra for them to fight against, since the consul already had twice as many soldiers collected as those who faced their enemies before, and there were many times as many Romans still who were capable of bearing arms.*" A hydra was a mythical dragon with multiple heads. For every head you cut off, two more grew in its place. It's important to note that in the same year as Cannae, a battle where Rome essentially lost its entire army, Marcellus repulsed two Carthaginian attacks at Nola, and the Scipio brothers defeated Hannibal's brother Hasdrubal at the Battle of Dertosa in the following year. You could knock the Romans down, but you sure as hell couldn't keep them there.

Philip had no such advantage. Macedon had been in a state of near-constant war since Alexander's time, and the struggles of his successors had steadily reduced the territory available for recruiting, while costing more lives. By the time of the Second Macedonian War, Philip was facing a manpower crisis.

Livy tells us that Philip enacted the provisions recorded in his conscription *diagramma*, as discussed earlier, recruiting young boys and old men to his ranks. While this would have given him desperately needed troops, it obviously also degraded his phalanx with inexperienced and physically weaker recruits, many of whom would likely be terrified at suddenly finding themselves on the battlefield.

Quality concerns aside, Philip was able to put around 16,000 phalangites into the field. These four brigades formed the core of his army, and were supplemented by 2,000 "peltasts." We don't know exactly who these troops were, but I think they are the *agēma* that I mention in chapter II. Philip is also said to have had 4,000 auxiliary troops, half from Thrace and half from Illyria. These were probably skirmishers or close-combat light infantry. He had a further 1,500 mercenaries, possibly Greeks, fighting as hoplites, *thureophoroi*, or in the Hellenistic style with pikes. He had 2,000 cavalry of his own, mostly Thessalians and Macedonians. It was these two forces who now turned their attention to the skirmish developing on the ridgeline above them.

Up on the ridge, both the Antigonid and Roman parties immediately sent messengers back to their respective armies begging for reinforcements.

Flaminius sent up some of his Aetolian contingent, 2,000 infantry and 500

cavalry. It appears they arrived first, and swung the skirmish in the favor of the Romans, who began to drive the Antigonid scouts back. The Antigonid force took refuge on the highest point of the ridge they could find, sending another messenger to Philip and the main army, warning him that if help didn't come, they were in serious trouble.

Philip can't have been happy about this. Since the Aous and Flamininus' winning of the hearts and minds of much of Greece, he'd been trying to avoid a general engagement. Even worse, the hilly, broken terrain at Cynoscephalae was not the clear, flat ground on which he'd have preferred to deploy his phalanx. Much of that phalanx, incidentally, was out foraging under Philip's general Nicanor (nicknamed "the Elephant"), and would take time to get back into camp, gear up and form up for a battle.

But, for all his faults, Philip wasn't going to abandon his scouting party to the enemy, and so, Polybius tells us, he sent his cavalry commander along with all of his mercenaries, except for the Thracians, to their aid.

With these reinforcements, the battle on the ridge top swung the other way, with the Romans being driven back nearly to their camp. The mist was beginning to lift now, and the armies below the ridge were probably starting to realize that this was more than a chance meeting of two scouting parties. Otherwise, where were all these reinforcements coming from?

Polybius credits the Aetolian cavalry with preventing a total rout on the Roman side. Where the Thessalians were known for their ability to deliver shock charges with their long spears, the Aetolians had mastered mounted skirmishing, wheeling, throwing javelins, then turning and bolting when the enemy closed. These tactics weren't new, and were made famous by the Numidian light cavalry who served under Hannibal during the Second Punic War. These North African mounted troops were not much in a standup fight, they lacked heavy armor, and were not trained to fight in close formations, but they could tire and wear down an enemy, and then pounce when wounds and fatigue finally made him vulnerable.

Even with the Aetolians keeping them from utter disaster, the Romans were still pushed off the ridge and down the slope on their own side. Flamininus would now have had a clear view of the fighting on the hillside, and could see the effect this was having on his own troops, watching their friends and comrades fighting a losing battle on a slope that favored the enemy. The sources don't tell us that Roman pride was injured by having to rely on foreigners like the Aetolians to save them, but I can't imagine they were pleased.

It's important to remember that morale was everything to an ancient army, because it was the bedrock on which the critical cohesion rested. Troops who were confident and brave would be less likely to edge backward, to flinch behind their comrades' shields, or worse, to run. Seeing the negative effect on his army's morale of watching their scouting party beaten back down the hill may not have been the only factor in Flamininus' next decision, but it would have been a major one.

Flaminius ordered his entire army to form up in battle order at the base of the ridge. He addressed his troops, and the tone of the address is a further indication that he was concerned about their morale. "You've fought these men before, and you've beaten them before," he reminded his men. "These are the same men you fought at the Aous, dug in to an impregnable position. You beat them in spite of the terrain, so why should that be any different here, where the ground is so much better? I'm confident this will be over quickly, and you should be too."

As the centurions were drumming their troops out and forming them up into their units, the victorious Antigoniids sent messenger after messenger back to Philip, telling him that a win was at hand, and he needed to go all in. "The enemy are running away!" they said, "they can't stand up to us. Don't miss your chance! Strike now!"

And so Philip, too, gave the order for the entire army to deploy in battle order.

Back on the other side of the ridge, Flaminius ordered his elephants out to screen his right wing, and advanced only with his left, who started up the hill to the aid of the retreating scouts. Seeing the main body of the Roman army coming to their aid, the scouts stopped their retreat and turned to face the enemy.

At the same time, Philip was also advancing with his peltasts. I'm going to assume, perhaps incorrectly, that we're talking about the *agēma* here; the sources are unclear. He had also brought up the right wing of his phalanx. The left was still out foraging. He left instructions for Nicanor to bring the rest of the troops up as soon as they could be recalled. He didn't want to miss his chance to rout the Romans by waiting for the rest of his army. According to what he was hearing from the messengers, he probably wouldn't need them anyway, since the Romans were in full retreat and all he would need to do was mop up.

So we wind up with yet another weird coincidence in the evolution of the battle. If the literary sources are to be believed, *both* commanders, ignorant of the other's presence, were marching uphill to the relief of their scouting parties with only half their troops. It's so unlikely as to be doubtful, but there's no way to confirm or disprove it, and if it is true, it is one hell of a story. Some of the fog would have burned off by this point, but what remained would have the soldiers marching uphill as if through smoke, dimly able to make out the battling skirmishers ahead of them. Fog has a weird echoing effect. It traps and rebounds sound, so that marching through it can almost feel like you're underwater. The shouts and clash of steel and bronze would have been muted, as would the orders of the officers and the rhythmic tread of the troops around them. It may have felt almost dreamlike. The Romans may not have seen Philip's right wing cresting the ridge far ahead of them.

We don't know why Philip reached the hilltop first. It's most likely because the Romans had been driven down the opposite slope, close to their own camp, and were even now fighting their way back up it, a process that would be much slower than Philip's troops, who were simply marching uphill unopposed. We do

know that Philip gained the ridge top first, and must have had a terrible shock when he finally looked down the slope and realized that he wasn't facing a scouting or foraging party, but the entire left half of the Roman army.

You may be asking yourself why the king didn't simply retreat if he didn't want to engage in a pitched battle, but you have to remember that moving that many thousands of men was not an easy task. Assuming Philip went up the ridge with two brigades, he would have had to issue orders to around 8,000 soldiers, and get them turned around and marched back down the hill, all while presenting their backs to the enemy, with its associated impact on his men's morale, not to mention putting them at serious risk of being taken in the rear if the Romans managed to catch up.

Philip knew that his army was now committed. If the Romans kept advancing up the hillside, he would have to give battle, and with only half his army. But he had reason to be cautiously optimistic. Although he was being forced into a battle that he hadn't wanted, it was on almost the best possible terms. His troops were at the top of the ridge, and while it wasn't ideal ground for a phalanx, it certainly didn't hurt to have the height advantage.

Philip hadn't even had a chance to order his troops properly before his mercenaries, beaten back now by the reinforced Romans, came streaming in. Philip reorganized these troops on his right wing, and gave the order to the squads to double up. The half-file leaders I mentioned in chapter II now brought the second half of each *lochos* out, countermarched them to the rear, and stacked them up behind the file-closer of the *lochos* next to them. Done with every other *lochos*, this would have created a new phalanx twice as deep as the one before. Think about how complicated this is. You have to know which *lochoi* are supposed to reform, you have to wheel and maneuver in very tight quarters (keep in mind that each phalangite had only 3 feet to himself), including an about-face, countermarch and reform. All of this on a ridge top in full armor in the middle of a battle and involving thousands of soldiers. The chance for confusion and disorder at a critical moment of the battle was high, and the fact that his troops pulled it off speaks to their level of discipline and training despite the recent widening of the recruiting criteria.

Why would Philip take such a risk? There are two good reasons. First, a deeper formation had more impact and pushing-power in a charge. I described the *othismos* earlier, the shoving match between two groups of hoplites that defined classical phalanx battle, and also the thinking behind Epaminondas' increase in the depth of his phalanx at the Battle of Leuctra. Phalangites were not hoplites, but the reasoning still held. The greater the depth of the formation, the more men you had pushing it forward, the heavier the shock of the impact and the greater the forward momentum. Second, Philip had just received a large body of fleeing soldiers into his ranks, his mercenaries being pushed back up the hill. Maybe these men were wavering, and maybe their low spirits were infecting the other soldiers. Phalanxes usually deployed their weakest troops, men of low morale, or raw troops, in the center of the phalanx. The thinking was that the

more veteran and braver rear ranks would give them courage, and serve as a constant reminder that there was literally nowhere to run. If they panicked and fled, they'd only succeed in running a foot before slamming into their braver comrade behind them. It's possible that Philip was doubling up his troops to ensure they didn't run, to increase the mass of the brave behind the wavering.

Whatever his reason, he accomplished this maneuver just in time, for the Romans had likewise taken in their scouting force and were now advancing to the charge. Philip ordered his phalanx to lower their pikes and rush downhill to meet them.

It was, by all accounts, a thunderclap of an impact. Philip's troops, heavily armored, raced downhill in close formation, shouting their war cries. The Romans ran up to meet them, raising their own chant, clashing javelins or swords against shields. The legionaries would have thrown their javelins from around 50 feet out, maybe less, since they were throwing uphill, raising a loud whoosh as so many iron and wooden shafts pierced the air, briefly shading the phalanx before the loud *thunk* of the metal heads driving into shields, pike shafts, helmets, flesh and bone. The screams would have started then, the shouts of the Antigonid officers to close the *lochoi* up, to keep formation at all costs.

And then the crash of the pike heads against the huge Roman shields, the screeching of the metal as it careened off the metal bosses, off helmets and greaves, the loud cracks as pike shafts broke, their wielders raising them and reversing them with a speed born of long practice, bringing the sharp butt-spike down again as their backup point.

I want to pause here to address a point that's considered settled in the scholarly community, but that I think should still be debated. Livy tells us that the Antigonids dropped their pikes and fought with their swords at this point in the battle. He claims that Philip "*ordered the peltasts and the Macedonian phalanx to put aside their spears, the length of which was a hindrance, and to engage with swords.*" Polybius and Plutarch say that the phalanx *lowered* their pikes and used them, and pretty much every modern scholar believes that Livy is either just plain wrong, or otherwise mistranslating his source material, possibly Polybius. They make a good point, but I do think Livy's statement bears some consideration.

Imagine charging downhill. I visited the site of the battle and stood on the ridge crest where the Antigonid phalanx began their charge. It is a fairly gentle slope, but not so gentle that I would be in a hurry to go running down it. Ever tried running down a steep hill without falling on your face? It takes some work even when you're just wearing shorts and a t-shirt. You have to straighten your body, adjust your center of gravity. Now try it in a linen cuirass and a bronze helmet, wearing bronze greaves, and carrying a shield. Now add a 16–21-foot pike to that mess. You get the picture. To call that charge "challenging" would be charitable. You can imagine that some pikes would hit the ground as their owners tried to control them, possibly turning phalangites into pole-vaulters. And what about the impact? Depending on the speed, would the pikes have broken? Worse, would they wind up riding over the legionaries' shoulders and sending the

fighting end above the enemy, all while bringing the phalangite right into the Roman swordsman's sweet spot? The slope is covered with long grass, which may have been wet from the fog, making footing uncertain for troops charging down a slope. The front rank of the phalanx wanted to stop, stand off and fight at as much range as the pike would allow, well clear of the Romans' deadly short swords. I can't imagine being able to stop under all that gear at a dead run, with the weight of 32 ranks of heavily armed men behind you. Those in the back probably couldn't even see the front line, let alone check their forward momentum to give them the standoff room to thrust with their pikes.

When you consider all this, Livy's statement makes a lot more sense.

Two other points to consider that might support the modern assertion that Livy mistranslated Polybius: the first is that a "charge" was really more of a walk. We have no way to know how fast troops moved when "charging." It's my belief, based on my own experience charging down the slope, that they moved at a very fast walk just short of a run, but slow enough to make sure the formation stayed together, and to avoid tripping or sliding. The second is the Latin itself. I asked expert Latinist Kelly DeVries to take a look at the passage to double-check my admittedly inexperienced translation. Livy's Latin could be read to mean that Philip ordered only those phalangites who were having trouble handling their pikes to drop them. This is a minor distinction, but it changes the narrative, because it means that Philip saw that the Romans were almost upon him, and was trying to get a countercharge going *right now*, with whatever weapons could be made ready. The picture that emerges is a phalanx where *most* of the troops had lowered pikes, with a few of the rawer recruits having dropped theirs in an effort to get into the fight faster with *some* weapon.

The Romans were brave, disciplined, well equipped. But they were also being charged from uphill by a fully formed, double-depth phalanx. With only 3 feet per man, the phalangites couldn't help but push the men in front, adding momentum to the downhill push. The Romans fought in a looser order, as Polybius says, about twice as much space per soldier. This meant that as the first line of the *hastati* crashed against the pike heads and slowed or stopped, there was a lot more room for them to be driven back before colliding with the shield of the man behind. This would create backward momentum on a slope that already favored the enemy.

So, it's not surprising that the Roman left began to buckle and give ground. The light infantry skirmished on the flanks and the cavalry likely looked for opportunities to ride in and exploit holes in the line, or assisted on the flanks, but the real struggle was between the legion and the phalanx at the center, and thus far, the superior ground was proving decisive for the long pikes of the phalanx.

If Philip had turned and looked up the hill at this moment, he would have been even more encouraged. There, he would have seen the head of Nicanor's column of phalangites, marching over the ridge top to join their king.

Flaminius was probably commanding from behind his troops. One can

picture him hearing his centurions shouting to the troops to hold their ground, to keep pushing against the enemy, those cries becoming more desperate as the men gave way, and eventually stopping as pike heads found the Romans and silenced them forever. Flamininus' left was collapsing, and as he saw the unstoppable momentum of the phalanx, he knew there was nothing he could do.

But he still had a right wing.

Polybius describes the consul wheeling his horse and galloping away to the other wing, still formed up and awaiting orders. There are a few ways to view this. You could see Flamininus as a coward, leaving his struggling left to its fate, or you could see it as the act of a skilled tactician, shifting his command to marshal the only force on the field who could save them. Events certainly suggest the latter interpretation.

The Roman right, if you remember, contained the Roman war elephants, arranged in a screen out in front of the infantry. No sooner had Flamininus arrived, than he would have looked up the hill to assess the enemy position.

And he would have been overjoyed.

Nicanor, hurrying to his master's aid, was just now rushing over the ridgeline, with his phalanx still in a marching column. We don't know exactly how Antigonid columns marched, but we do know that a long, narrow marching column was not a phalanx deployed and ready for battle. Worse, these men were rushed, hurrying over the ridge top and suddenly being treated to a view of the chaotic battle whirling below them. They may have been tired from the rush, and they may have even been missing some of their kit, as they had just been out foraging and may not have had time to gear up properly before hurrying off to meet the enemy. The ridgeline was uneven ground, and sloping. While this had favored Philip's formed right wing when it was charging, it certainly wasn't ideal terrain for transitioning a phalanx from a column into proper battle order. As Polybius tells us that Nicanor had "*the greater part of the force*," it is possible that Philip's right was less than 8,000 men, or 50 percent, of the phalanx. It may have been a single brigade of approximately 4,096 men, or some other partial unit. Nicanor may have been marching with more than 8,000, which made what happened next an even greater blow to the Antigonids.

But even if Nicanor had half the phalanx, just getting the orders out to that many men, let alone executing them, would take time.

It was time Flamininus was determined not to let them have.

An Uphill Charge and a Genius in the Ranks: the Battle Turns

I walked the battlefield at Cynoscephalae, including the long drainage gully down which Nicanor's force would have marched. It's fairly steep, broken terrain, not an easy haul to get up, especially under heavy armor and weapons. It's poor ground for any military unit attempting to keep in formation, and it's especially poor for rigid formations like the Hellenistic phalanx.

Hiking this terrain, I was out of breath fairly quickly, and I'm in good shape by

modern standards, at least. As I toiled up the slope, it was doubly dramatic for me to consider Flamininus sounding the charge uphill, the elephants leading the way, no doubt laboring to haul their massive bulk up the slope, the infantry struggling to keep pace.

The battle had turned into a race.

If Flamininus could strike Nicanor's disorganized column before Philip could break and rout the Roman left wing, he could wheel his troops and come to the aid of his struggling left. With a clear view uphill of Nicanor's troops, and to his left of the pitched battle between the Roman left and the Antigonid right, he surely knew this. One instant, the Roman right was standing ready behind their elephants, and the next here came Flamininus, galloping in and shouting at them to get running.

And run they did. I picture Nicanor halting as he saw the elephants advancing, shouting to his tribunes to get the men into battle order, the troops scrambling to comply, knowing it was far too late, that the Romans were coming on much too fast.

The two drainage gullies on the battlefield are separated by another low ridge, so the fighting on the right and left evolved separately, out of view of one another. That said, ancient battles were loud, and I would be surprised if Philip didn't hear the action going on just to his left. I like the idea that he heard the screaming, mostly in Greek, and realized the trouble he was in. He would have turned to his own officers then, shouting at them to pour it on, to break the Roman left as quickly as possible, knowing it was their only chance to win this. The Romans, in turn, would have struggled to hold the line, to throw back the incredible weight of bronze and iron bearing down on them, to fix them in place long enough to let Flamininus come to their aid.

And that is exactly what happened. All the sources agree that Nicanor's troops either didn't bother to fight, or put up such a weak resistance as to make no difference. The phalanx was a formation that relied on group mass and cohesion. It was built around presenting pike points so dense that they were impossible to get around. Unless properly deployed, it was simply a mob of individuals with giant spears, so long that their points could be easily avoided.

A few may have tried to stand and fight, but most would have merely dropped their pikes and run for their lives. The few that did stand would have been more or less alone against charging elephants, and while a lucky pike thrust might have worked against an infantry or cavalryman, it was a heck of a lot less likely to help against an elephant.

Behind the elephants came the legion, with its usual hail of javelins followed by the rush with drawn swords. Formed, the phalanx would have had a chance to check the Roman momentum, but as it was, disorganized and overwhelmed, it didn't stand a chance. Even having the high ground was of little help, and the few who stood their ground would have been surrounded and cut down. Within moments, Nicanor's entire force, all of the Antigonid left wing, was in full rout, running for their lives.

Even with this major development, the battle could have swung either way. Flamininus had beaten Nicanor, but the panicked, fleeing mass of the Antigonid left could have still rallied and rejoined the battle. Meanwhile, on the Roman left, things were looking a lot worse, with the formed phalanx driving them back on their camp, threatening to break through. If Philip put the Roman left to rout, he could then turn his victorious right and face off against Flamininus' right on the ridge, provided that he could keep his troops from pursuing the fleeing soldiers or from trying to plunder the Roman camp.

In the end, the battle came down to a bold Roman tribune, who saw an opportunity and took advantage of it. The man's name is lost to history, as is his origin, or if he was recognized for this heroic feat. If he was a tribune, then he was likely younger, maybe in his 20s, and probably from an aristocratic, or at least wealthy family. I believe that whoever he was, he was recognized for his actions, since it is noted in the sources, and if they are writing it down, that means he is remembered. We do know that his brilliant maneuver ensured a Roman victory.

This unnamed tribune managed to halt 20 maniples of Flamininus' victorious right, who were currently chasing Nicanor's troops off the field. Halting pursuing troops when they had the bit in their teeth was no mean feat. As ancient troops made their money largely off looting enemy dead, breaking off pursuit meant risking that whatever good loot there was to be had would already be gone by the time these men got clear to get at it.

So, whoever this tribune was, he had the personal magnetism and respect of his troops to get nearly 2,500 men to listen to him, and abandon their own financial interests in the cause of winning the battle. These were probably mostly, or at least led by, maniples of *triarii*. First, because these would have been to the rear of the force chasing Nicanor off the field, and therefore best positioned to make the maneuver I'm about to describe. Secondly, because *triarii* were the oldest and most veteran troops, most likely to have good discipline and to understand the importance of winning a battle before looting. Thirdly, legionary service was based partially on wealth, and only the Roman cavalry would have had more money than the *triarii*, which would have made them more resistant to the lure of plunder than others.

The unnamed tribune halted these 20 companies and wheeled them left across the intervening ridge, like a barn door swinging shut. The Antigonid right were completely locked up with the Roman left, and even if they were aware of the danger, there wouldn't have been anything they could have done. Phalanxes fought in one direction – straight ahead – and if they turned to face the new threat, they would have been cut to pieces by the Romans previously to their front.

And so this unnamed tribune swung the door shut, slamming his 20 companies into the Antigonid rear. Suddenly, the victorious force found themselves pinned between fresh troops behind them, and renewed ferocity from the Romans at their front, inspired by the sight of their comrades coming to their

rescue.

Philip fought desperately to hold his men together, but at last his panicked soldiers began to drop their weapons and flee, and he realized it was hopeless. You can only imagine the shame that must have burned in him as he turned his horse and galloped off the field, leaving his men to their fate.

Aftermath

Cynoscephalae cannot be thought of as a “set piece” battle, where commanders choose the location and time, and the contest is considered “fair.” It was a total accident, with neither commander liking the ground, the timing or the conditions. As such, it was an incredible risk to both armies, and you can see how closely run it was.

The rout of the Antigonids had the usual results of ancient battles, a relentless pursuit by the enemy which caused far more casualties than were suffered during the actual fighting. Philip escaped, and he reappears in the story, first, somewhat surprisingly, as a friend to Rome and then as an enemy yet again. In the end, the sources tell us around 8,000 Antigonids were killed and another 5,000 captured, possibly to be sold as slaves. The Romans lost only 700 men, probably mostly on the left holding the Antigonid right in place until the rear attack could be made.

There’s an interesting account of the treatment of the defeated troops, where some of the Antigonid phalangites raised their pikes straight up, which was their indication of surrender. It isn’t clear if the Romans killed them because they misunderstood the gesture, or if they were so on fire with battle lust that they couldn’t restrain themselves, but kill them they did. Polybius, at least, excuses Flamininus for this act of slaughter, putting the blame on his overzealous soldiers. He’s probably right to do so. The Romans, at this point, had fought multiple battles against Hellenistic phalanxes, more than enough to be familiar with their symbols of surrender. It’s likely the soldiers were inflamed with rage and the exultation of victory, or else ignored the gesture so that they could more easily strip the men of their property.

The Romans then went on to ransack the Antigonid camp, only to find that the mounted Aetolians had beaten them to it and had taken nearly anything that wasn’t tied down. Keep this in mind, because the Romans couldn’t have been happy about this, and it may have contributed to the tensions in advance of the Battle of Magnesia, which followed seven years later.

Closely run as this was, we have to count this as another win for the legion over the phalanx. It is no less important to consider how a formation performs under less than ideal circumstances (surprised, on bad ground, poorly supported) than under ideal ones when we think about which one is “better.” At Cynoscephalae, both commanders were surprised, both suffered reverses, and both had moments where victory seemed assured. In the absence of additional data – and while I can dream, it’s unlikely we’ll ever get it – we have to count this up as a win, fair and square.

Humiliating peace terms were inflicted on Philip, which would have repercussions in the years to come. Philip was forced to evacuate all of Greece and give up territory he held in Asia Minor and Thrace. He had to pay a war indemnity (referred to as a tribute), and get rid of his navy. Worse, he was forced to become a Roman ally, in the subordinate status of a client king, which must have chafed the proud man. And this final indignity – he was to give up his son Demetrius, sending him to Rome as a hostage. This would have far-reaching repercussions for the Antigonid dynasty and would lead, in part, to the great Battle of Pydna, a decisive clash between legion and phalanx which followed just shy of 30 years after Cynoscephalae. The battle would spell the doom of the Antigonid dynasty, and ensure Roman hegemony over the Hellenistic world.



VIII

MAGNESIA, 190 BC: NO REFUGE FOR HANNIBAL

Antiochus was displaying to him on the plain the gigantic forces which he had mustered to make war on the Roman people, and was maneuvering his army glittering with gold and silver ornaments. He also brought up chariots with scythes, elephants with turrets, and horsemen with brilliant bridles, saddlecloths, neck-chains and trappings. And then the king, filled with vainglory at the sight of an army so great and so well equipped, turned to Hannibal and said: “Do you think that all this can be equaled and that it is enough for the Romans?” Then the Carthaginian, deriding the worthlessness and inefficiency of the king’s troops in their costly armor, replied: “I think all this will be enough, yes, quite enough for the Romans, greedy as they are.”

Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*

Magnesia may seem like a departure from the current narrative. The first three battles of the book are from the Pyrrhic War, and the fourth and sixth are from the Macedonian Wars, and now we are suddenly shoehorning in a battle from the Syrian War. The title of the war is actually misleading, as the Syrian War was a direct outgrowth of the Second Macedonian War, and indeed Cynoscephalae in particular, and you’ll see how this is actually a cohesive, linear narrative.

Part of this is because Antiochus III, one of the commanders at Magnesia, was a “successor” king like Philip V, the leader of the Seleucid dynasty, which was descended, like the Antigonids, from one of Alexander the Great’s generals. In order to understand Antiochus and his role in the battle, we must understand who the Seleucids were and how they came to face off against the might of Rome in the wake of Philip’s defeat at Cynoscephalae.

The “Syrian Greeks”

Growing up as a Jewish kid in New York, we looked forward to the celebration of Hanukkah every year. Jokingly called the “Jewish Christmas” (it usually falls at roughly the same time), it was a hit with kids as it involved a minimum of prayer and ceremony and a maximum of gifts and games. At the time I vaguely understood that the holiday celebrated a military victory, and something about miraculous oil lights burning longer than they should, but whatever. There were presents to open.

The holiday actually celebrates the victory of the Maccabean Jews over the “Syrian Greeks,” who were the Seleucids, the descendants of Alexander the Great’s general Seleucus I Nicator. Seleucus began his ascent to kingship with the city of Babylon in 312 BC. He and his descendants then gradually increased his empire’s holdings to include much of modern day Turkey, the Levant, and what is now Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kurdistan. Don’t let the largely Balkan and “stan” territories fool you. Seleucus and his descendants were dyed-in-the-wool Hellenistic rulers, which is to say that they were culturally Greek. Apart from some Eastern flavoring, you’d have found a lot of similarities in the lifestyle, court culture and goals of Antiochus III and Philip V.

Seleucus, like Alexander the Great, expanded as far east as India. Unlike Alexander, his army didn’t mutiny. Instead, they were fought to a standstill by the Indian emperor Chandragupta Maurya, who gave his name to the first unified empire in that region’s history. The turn of the 1st century BC Greek historian and geographer Strabo details the peace settlement:

The Indians occupy [in part] some of the countries situated along the Indus, which formerly belonged to the Persians: Alexander deprived the Ariani of them, and established there settlements of his own. But Seleucus Nicator gave them to Chandragupta Maurya [Strabo calls him Sandrocottus] in consequence of a marriage contract, and received in return five hundred elephants.

These elephants proved decisive at the Battle of Ipsus in 301 BC (where Pyrrhus fought so bravely), and allowed Seleucus to expand westwards to a degree that more than made up for his loss in the stalemate against Chandragupta.

Antiochus III was the great-great-grandson of this original Seleucus. He wasn’t supposed to be king, being four years younger than his older brother Seleucus III Keraunos (“Thunderbolt”). On the death of their father, Seleucus II Callinicus (“Gloriously Triumphant”), King Attalus I Soter (“Savior”) of Pergamon seized some of the western Seleucid territories, and Seleucus III and his brother Antiochus III crossed the Taurus mountains in 223 BC to win them back.

During this trip, Polybius names two members of Seleucus III’s army, Apaturius the Gaul and Nicanor (not the same Nicanor from Cynoscephalae) as assassinating him. Whether they did this on Attalus’ orders isn’t known, but Antiochus would only have been 18 at the time, not a baby, but certainly young enough to be vulnerable to older and more politically astute operators. Achaews,

Seleucus III's uncle, assumed command of the army and put Apaturius and Nicanor to death; however, in a stunning display of ethics by the treacherous standards of the ancient world, he did not take the crown for himself, and instead led the army into battle in the service of Antiochus III, the new Seleucid king. Antiochus proved himself to be both energetic and able, but he was confronted with a chain reaction of revolts as local potentates sought to take advantage of his brother's death.

Diodotus I Soter was Antiochus' satrap (governor) of Bactria, a territory that encompassed modern day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Diodotus rebelled, declaring the province to be an independent kingdom. Parthia, an ancient territory that roughly covered modern day Iran, also threw off Seleucid allegiance and installed Arsaces I as an independent ruler. Media and Persis, both Seleucid provinces in modern day northern Iran, also rebelled. Media Atropatene, another province in modern day Iran, rebelled under Artabazanes, the grandson of the Persian king Darius II. The governors of Media and Persis, the brothers Molon and Alexander, defeated the army sent against them, and it was only Achaeus' efforts against Attalus I that restored some of the lost provinces to Seleucid control.

In 221 BC, Antiochus finally became personally involved in Persis and Media and the rebellion was put down. This was shortly followed by the submission of Artabazanes. Achaeus himself then rose up, declaring himself king of the territories he had taken back from Attalus.

With his kingdom still far from settled, Antiochus left the rebellions alone, and instead marched against his neighbor and rival Ptolemy IV. Ptolemy IV Philopator was the great-grandson of Ptolemy I Soter, one of Alexander the Great's generals and one of the "successors" who carved up his empire after his death. Antiochus challenged Ptolemy for control of the Levant, and was badly mauled at the Battle of Raphia in 217 BC, which forced him to withdraw north of modern day Lebanon.

Antiochus showed the attention span of Pyrrhus, and turned his attention now against his rebellious uncle Achaeus. He defeated and executed Achaeus, subdued Asia Minor, then invaded Parthia and forced the king Arsaces II to accept a humiliating peace with Arsaces as Antiochus' client king. In 209 BC, Antiochus marched on Bactria and defeated the king, Euthydemus I, at the Battle of Arius, effectively recovering all of the territory lost to him during the original spate of rebellions on the death of his brother.

We cannot know whether Antiochus fancied himself another Alexander, but we cannot ignore that he did a lot of Alexander-like things. Among these was not simply stopping with Bactria, and instead marching east into India, where he "renewed his friendship" (according to Polybius) with the Indian king Sophagasenus. This renewal, which was likely to have been a paying of tribute after either a battle or the threat of one, resulted in a gift of more war elephants and a great deal of money.

Antiochus used these to renew his attacks on the Levant, and in 200 BC, he

defeated a Ptolemaic army under the leadership of the Aetolian general Scopas at the Battle of Panium. By 198 BC, just before Philip's defeat at Cynoscephalae, Antiochus was in full possession of Coele-Syria, roughly equivalent to the modern day Bekka valley. Along the way, he had made his pact with Philip to divide the territory of the infant Ptolemy V, which we discussed in the previous chapter.

Rome's Mortal Enemy and the Traitors of Greece

Antiochus was on a roll. More importantly, he was on a roll westward, which would shortly put him in Rome's sphere of influence. The timing was bad for this. Flamininus had just proclaimed total freedom for the Greeks. He had underscored this with a dramatic proclamation read out at the Isthmian Games, a kind of mini-Olympics, in 196 BC. Polybius paints a picture of how this was received:

... there was such an outbreak of clapping as is difficult to convey to the imagination of my readers at this time. When at length the clapping ceased, no one paid any attention whatever to the athletes, but all were talking to themselves or each other, and seemed like people bereft of their senses. No, after the games were over, in the extravagance of their joy, they nearly killed Flamininus by the exhibition of their gratitude.

This reaction can't have failed to make a strong impression on Rome, which wasn't about to let this "freedom" be compromised by a foreign power.

I put the word "freedom" in quotes, because Rome "freed" the Greeks with a very heavy hand. The Antigonids had dominated Greece by means of three fortresses known as the "Fetters of Greece": Chalcis, Corinth and Demetrias, which Flamininus now demanded be handed over to Rome.

The Aetolians, who had been so instrumental in the Roman victory at Cynoscephalae, were furious at this, and also annoyed that they were not being as richly rewarded as they'd hoped to be. Polybius again: "*Hence it was plain that the Romans were receiving the 'Fetters of Greece' from the hands of Philip, and that the Greeks were getting, not freedom, but a change of masters.*"

Meet the new boss, same as the old boss. The Aetolians felt duped, and while they had no love for Philip, the Roman garrisons were a constant reminder that they were being treated unfairly.

A "cold war" of sorts developed, with both Rome and Antiochus attempting to sway Greece toward their cause. Sure, Philip was a Roman "ally" now, but the memory of the Second Macedonian War was still fresh, and while Antiochus had now made peace with Ptolemy in 195 BC, sealed by the marriage of his daughter Cleopatra I to Ptolemy, his maneuvers toward Greece had greatly alarmed some of Rome's allies, such as the island city-state of Rhodes.

The tense relationship between Antiochus and Rome was made much worse when Antiochus welcomed none other than Hannibal Barca, the famous Carthaginian general from the Second Punic War, to his court as a trusted

advisor.

Keep in mind that Hannibal was an absolute demon in the Roman popular imagination; both Livy and the 1st century BC Roman orator Marcus Tullius Cicero tell us that the expression *Hannibal ad portas* (Hannibal is at the gates) was used to frighten naughty Roman children. Hannibal had inflicted on the Romans the greatest defeat in their history, and brought them arguably the closest to an existential crisis that they had been since Brennus led the Senones to sack Rome in 390 BC. Bringing Hannibal into his court is to a degree equivalent of modern day Russia harboring the famous American leaker of classified information, Edward Snowden, at least in terms of the insult to the Roman people. In some ways, it was far worse. Snowden has leaked secrets, but Hannibal was responsible for tens of thousands of Roman deaths, and arguably held hegemony over much of Rome's territory for nearly two decades. It certainly didn't help build trust between the two powers.

During the Second Macedonian War, Philip had given control of the city of Argos to the Spartan king Nabis in exchange for his abandoning Rome and joining the Antigonid cause. Now, Philip was defeated and gone from Greece, and Nabis still held the city-state.

The senate decreed war be made to free Argos, and Flamininus assembled a coalition of the Achaean League, Pergamon, Rhodes and, yes, even Philip and the Antigonids, now reluctant "allies" of Rome. Livy details the tense negotiations to assemble this coalition, and in particular the complaints of the Aetolians, in a foreshadowing of what was to come. The Aetolians asked Flamininus to remove his troops back to Italy and let them handle Sparta, but were all but shouted down by Aristaenus, the Achaean League representative.

The war ended successfully for Flamininus. Sparta surrendered, joined the Achaean League, and essentially ended its run as a politically independent power in Greece. However, the rift between Rome and the Aetolians grew. Recall that after Cynoscephalae, the Aetolians plundered Philip's camp before the Romans could arrive. The Roman refusal of the Aetolian offer to handle Sparta was another indicator of worsening relations between Rome and the Aetolians.

By 192 BC, the immediate crisis of the Second Macedonian War had passed, and most of the Roman troops were withdrawn from Greece. The Aetolians finally felt safe enough to give voice to their resentment and sent an embassy to Antiochus, inviting him to liberate Greece from Roman occupation.

Taking on Rome was not a decision to be made lightly, and Antiochus planned and made ready, until the Aetolian taking of Demetrias illustrated the possibility of Roman weakness and convinced him the time was ripe. Antiochus crossed the Hellespont that same year at the head of an army of "liberation." Rome declared war, and began coordinating troops to meet him.

Restless Dead and Thermopylae Redux

During his march through Thessaly, Antiochus passed the old battlefield of

Cynoscephalae, where the bones of the Antigonid dead still remained, five years later. Antiochus made a great show of burying these bones, accusing Philip of neglecting his countrymen. Providing a proper burial was very important to both the Greeks in the original territory of Greece and their Hellenistic contemporaries in the farther-flung regions of the Balkans and the Middle East.

Appian tells us that Antiochus' goal was to curry favor with the Macedonians by championing their burial rites, but it seriously backfired. Philip, who was a reluctant Roman ally to put it charitably, had been considering joining Antiochus in his fight against Rome. After all, Antiochus was a Hellenistic king like Philip, a descendant of one of Alexander's generals, like Philip, and they already had a history of working together against Ptolemy. But this insult convinced Philip to double down on his commitment to Rome.

Philip reached out to the Roman Marcus Baebius Tamphilus, who immediately began to work with him to counter Antiochus. First came the Roman Appius Claudius Pulcher with an advance guard of 2,000 soldiers, and through a clever trick – he lit a large number of campfires to disguise how small a force he actually had – frightened Antiochus into deviating from his course.

At last, a proper Roman army of 2,000 horse, 20,000 foot, and some elephants arrived under the command of Manius Acilius Glabrio.

Antiochus responded by blocking the pass at Thermopylae, the same tight confines that Leonidas and his 300 Spartans had so famously defended in 480 BC. Antiochus was outnumbered at least 2 to 1, but the pass was some of the most defensible ground in the region, and he was holding out for reinforcements from Asia.

This “Fifth Battle of Thermopylae” (the famous stand of the Spartan 300 was the first) is not the Battle of Magnesia that is the subject of this chapter, but the outcome of this battle strongly influenced the Battle of Magnesia, so we need to take a moment to examine it. I like Appian's account best. He lays out a great argument for why Thermopylae was such a defensible position. It was so defensible that it would ultimately be the site of eight battles from the First Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC all the way up until 1941 when the Allies defended the pass in a rearguard action during the German invasion of Greece: “*The passage at Thermopylae is long and narrow, flanked on the one side by a rough and inhospitable sea and on the other by a deep and impassable morass. It is overhung by two mountain peaks, one called Tichius and the other Callidromus. The place also contains some hot springs, whence comes the name Thermopylae, ‘hot gates’.*”

It was one of the most defensible positions in all of Greece, and more importantly, the only land route useable by ancient armies on the march heading north–south through Thessaly down to Attica.

Antiochus dug in here, building a double wall across the pass, and covering it with artillery. He would have known the story of the Spartan defeat in 480 BC through Ephialtes' treachery, and ordered his Aetolian allies into the heights, 1,000 to Tichius and another 1,000 to Callidromus to prevent the Romans from repeating that same flank march.

The strategy was sound, but Antiochus didn't send enough troops, and he also placed too much faith in his Aetolian allies, rather than sending his own Seleucid soldiers to do this critical work, possibly because the broken ground and confined space of mountain passes wasn't conducive to the formed phalanx and the giant pike. Manius would also have known the story of Ephialtes, and he did exactly as Antiochus predicted, sending forces of picked troops (Livy tells us 2,000 each) under Lucius Valerius Flaccus and Cato the Elder (not quite "elder" then, being 43 years old) to secure these same heights.

Lucius was repulsed, but Cato caught the Aetolians sleeping, which is surprising, considering that they knew the Romans would be coming and were dispatched to stop this very thing. Even surprised, the Aetolians fought bitterly, and Cato paid for every inch of ground.

Meanwhile, Manius marched the main body of his troops into the pass and against Antiochus' phalanx, which was around two brigades strong. Appian again gives us a vivid description of the fighting:

Battle being joined, the light-armed troops assailed Manius first, rushing in from all sides. He received their onset bravely, first yielding and then advancing and driving them back. The phalanx opened and let the light-armed men pass through. It then closed and pushed forward, the long pikes set densely together in order of battle, with which the Macedonians from the time of Alexander and Philip have struck terror into enemies who have not dared to encounter the thick array of long pikes presented to them.

I walked the battlefield at Thermopylae. While the coastline has migrated significantly since the time of the battle, you can still see that the ground was perfect terrain for a phalanx – flat, level, unbroken, with the flanks covered by high ground. The Romans were forced to face the impenetrable thicket of pikes head on, and Livy tells us that, under these conditions, they were being badly mauled. Livy says that the Romans “... *would have had either to retire baffled or sustain serious losses had not M. Porcius* [this is Cato] *appeared on a hill which commanded the camp.*”

The first panicked Aetolians had arrived, fleeing for the Seleucid camp with Cato and his troops hot on their heels. In the confusion of the battle, it was impossible to know if Cato was coming at the head of a couple of maniples or an entire army. I described in chapter IV how the thought of a plundered camp shook Pyrrhus' phalangites. The same was true here, and Antiochus was unable to stop his troops from breaking formation and retreating to their camp to defend it from plunder.

This, of course, led to disaster, as the phalanx was only effective when fully formed. When all was said and done, Antiochus managed to escape, but only at the loss of (if you believe Appian) his entire force, while the Romans lost a mere 200 men.

This was, technically, a legion versus phalanx battle, and therefore bears mentioning, especially in terms of the fact that, before Cato's flanking maneuver, the Seleucids were winning. However, it was much smaller than Magnesia, less significant, and has a lot less available source material to draw on, so we count it

as a lead-in to the much larger and decisive battle at Magnesia – a true test bed to see how the legion performs against the phalanx.

The Chickens Come Home to Roost – Magnesia ad Sipylum

The defeat at Thermopylae was enough for Antiochus. He withdrew from Greece and returned to Ephesus, in Lydia – what is now the west coast of Turkey. He was likely hopeful that the Romans would be content with that. Manius had made good on Flaminius' promise that the Greeks would be free, at least from Antiochus, though not from the Romans. Back in Lydia, Antiochus was firmly within his own sphere of influence and outside Rome's. He could rebuild his army, enter into negotiations and come up with a new way forward.

But Livy gives us some foreshadowing in a speech Manius makes to the troops before the fight at Thermopylae. He tells his troops that if they win:

... you will open up Asia and Syria and all the wealthiest realms to the furthest East to the supremacy of Rome. What will then prevent us from extending our dominion from Gades to the Red Sea with no limit but the ocean which enfolds the world, and making the whole human race look up to Rome with a reverence only second to that which they pay to the gods? Show yourselves worthy in heart and mind of such vast rewards so that we may take the field tomorrow assured that the gods will help us.

This speech gives the lie to Flaminius' proclaimed "freedom of the Greeks," and bolsters the Aetolian claim that the Romans were ultimately seeking not to liberate, but to master. Antiochus' foray into Greece had given them the excuse they needed to enter Asia.

The Romans, meanwhile, prosecuted the Aetolian War from 191 to 189 BC, a punitive campaign that punished the Aetolians for inviting Antiochus in the first place. The Aetolians begged Antiochus to return and not abandon them, but the king only sent money, leaving the actual fighting to his allies. They didn't fare well, and the Romans reduced them to a mere puppet state by 189 BC.

Antiochus clung to the hope that the Romans would not pursue him into Asia. Livy, with his usual dramatic flair, has Antiochus listening to bad counsel from fawning advisors, while only the wise and veteran Hannibal warned him that, once they had finished with the Aetolians, the Romans would surely be coming for him. Livy also has Hannibal advising Antiochus against accepting the Aetolian invitation to cross the Hellespont in the first place, also ignored.

Antiochus was finally swayed by Hannibal's argument, and accepted that the Romans were indeed coming for him. He assembled an army and navy and prepared to face them. His navy, under Hannibal and Antiochus' brilliant lieutenant Polyxenidas, fought several engagements with the Roman navy and that of its allies, Rhodes and Pergamon, who also mercilessly raided Seleucid territory on the western coast of Turkey. At last, largely driven from the sea, and with the Romans across the Hellespont and into Asia, Antiochus sent an embassy to the Romans asking for peace, and agreeing to concede all his claims in

“Europe.” The Romans responded that they wouldn’t be satisfied until he surrendered all his Asian territory on the nearer side (to them) of the Taurus mountains. This was the territory that Antiochus had retaken from Achaeus, and the Romans must have known that he would never surrender it.

Backed into a corner, Antiochus prepared to fight outside Magnesia ad Sipylum in modern day Manisa, Turkey. He had good reason to be confident in his prospects. Since the disaster at Thermopylae, he had managed to assemble a huge force. Livy, almost certainly exaggerating, counts 62,000 foot and 12,000 horse! The true number was probably closer to 50,000 all told. Even better, his main opponent, the greatest general in all of Rome, was ill.

A Storm of Scythes – Magnesia

Publius Cornelius Scipio, dubbed “Africanus” (“Conqueror of Africa”) for his subjugation of Carthage, was a legend among the Romans. Widely considered to be the most brilliant general in Rome, the only man who had been able to defeat Hannibal and save the Republic from the Carthaginian invasion, he was the logical choice for the campaign against Antiochus.

The problem was, he was ineligible to serve as consul for that year, which meant he could not have command of the consular army. Instead, his brother Lucius was elected. Roman consuls were allotted provinces to govern and campaigns to direct, and both consuls were pushing for Greece. When Africanus volunteered to serve on his brother’s military staff as one of his generals, the senate overwhelmingly agreed to give the campaign in “Greece” (Asia Minor, really) to Lucius.

This assignment would have given Lucius every reason to be confident in an easy victory. Antiochus had already been badly mauled at Thermopylae, driven home with his tail between his legs. The Romans had been victorious in the Aegean, and all along the coast of Lydia, and now Lucius would have his brother, the greatest tactical mind in his country, to help lead his army.

And then, suddenly, on the eve of battle, Africanus fell ill.

Some scholars have suggested that the illness was possibly faked, as Africanus wanted to give the glory of the victory to his brother. This is unlikely. While the timing does seem convenient, we don’t have any proof for this, and Africanus had been ill before. What we do know is that Africanus was not on the field at Magnesia, and that command rested firmly on Lucius. Lucius did have Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus as another of his generals. Ahenobarbus was a veteran commander who had fought successfully against the Boii, a Celtic people living on the Italian side of the Alps. It’s not clear to what extent Lucius led the army, and to what extent he leaned on Ahenobarbus, but we do know that all the credit for the battle accrued to Lucius.

Lucius found Antiochus camped near the Phrygus river, the modern Turkish Gediz river, again with a double rampart protecting his position. Amidst continuous skirmishing from the king’s cavalry and skirmishers, the Romans

crossed the river and made their camp. For five days, the armies were camped within sight of one another; according to Appian, they were about two miles apart, with the armies deployed in battle order outside the ramparts, but neither one would make a move. Once, Lucius even marched his troops into the center of the plain, good ground for a phalanx, but Antiochus declined to march out to meet him.

The obvious question is, “Why didn’t Lucius just attack?” Keep in mind that Antiochus’ troops were drawn up just outside his fortified camp. As we have seen, the camps of ancient armies were not simply collections of tents. They were fortresses, with ditches, ramparts, gates, turrets, artillery and other defensive features. If Lucius had attacked, it would have been simple for Antiochus to withdraw his army inside his camp, forcing the Romans to storm his ramparts. Such actions greatly favored the defenders. It was in the Romans’ best interests to coax Antiochus out to fight a field battle.

Winter was coming on, and keeping an army in the field in the winter months was near impossible. Ancient armies stripped the land bare wherever they went, and forage was a constant problem. The longer a large army stayed in one place, the greater the risk of disease, hunger and the kind of altercations that always break out when a bunch of fighting men are idle together. Seeing that Antiochus wasn’t inclined to come out and fight, Lucius finally moved his entire camp forward, deciding that if Antiochus didn’t react to this latest provocation, he would just go ahead and assault the king’s fortified camp.

But Livy tells us that standing idle was killing Seleucid morale. Antiochus’ army was huge, the ground was good, he was fighting on his home turf, and his opponent’s greatest military mind was sick and off the field. It wasn’t going to get any better than this. If he wanted to keep up his army’s belief in the possibility of victory, he had to take his men out to fight. This he did, unfolding his battle line to outflank his opponents.

The Romans had to watch in horror as the Seleucid line stretched and unfurled, outreaching the Roman right, and extending off into the distance. This overlap would easily curl in, crushing the Roman flank when battle was joined.

Livy and Appian both give a lot of detail on the composition of the opposing armies. Lucius had two legions, each at around 5,000 men, and another two of Latin and Italian allies. When you factor in the auxiliaries attached to these, you get around 20,000 heavy infantry. The Romans occupied the center of the battle line, with the allied troops spreading out on the wings. King Eumenes of Pergamon, the son of Attalus I, had brought some troops, who were mixed in with Achaean *caetrati* (Livy’s word), which probably means they were “peltasts” armed as phalangites, or else skirmishers, to the total of around 3,000. Eumenes also supplied 800 horsemen, who were mixed in with the Roman cavalry and more Trallian (a Thracian tribe) and Cretan allied cavalry, again to a total of 3,000, though depending on whether you rely on Livy or Appian, this number can shift. This mounted force formed the Roman right flank guard. Their left flank was protected by the river, which would keep the enemy from getting

around it to attack from the rear.

Lucius also had 16 war elephants, but we can figure out from Livy that these were the smaller Atlas elephants, much smaller than Antiochus' Indian elephants. Atlas elephants were around 8 feet at the shoulder, where Indian elephants were around 11 feet at the shoulder. Recognizing this size disparity, Lucius elected to keep his elephants back. He may also have been unwilling to trust the elephants in a fight, as they tended to rampage when they were wounded badly enough, and didn't distinguish between friend and foe when they did.

To call the Seleucid force "daunting" would be putting it mildly. Antiochus likely had around 50,000 infantry. The core of this force was the phalanx, 16,000 men strong. These were broken up into ten *chiliarchiai*, with two elephants between each one. Appian tells us it was 22 elephants, but that would mean Antiochus would have 220 elephants in his front line alone. This is far more than we've ever seen in an ancient battle. Hannibal had just 80 at Zama in 202 BC, and that was in Africa, closer to the elephant's range. Given this, I'm inclined to believe Livy's count of two elephants per interval. Livy adds that the elephants wore armor with crests and that they had towers on their backs that contained the driver and four soldiers. Whatever the practical value, they must have looked terrifying. Appian gives a great literary flourish here: "*The appearance of the phalanx was like that of a wall, of which the elephants were the towers.*"

For the life of me, I cannot understand the logic behind this deployment. As we've seen from previous battles, war elephants were unreliable, tending to rampage through their own ranks when frightened or driven mad by loud noises or wounds. Neither Livy nor Appian provides exact distances between the *chiliarchiai* of the phalanx, but breaking up a formation that is entirely dependent on cohesion with unreliable animals that are prone to stampede is a clear mistake. Even Appian marvels at Antiochus' use of his phalanx: "*The serried phalanx, in which he should have placed most confidence, on account of its high state of discipline, was crowded together unskillfully in a narrow space.*" We have deep detail as to the deployment of the phalanx – each of the ten *chiliarchiai* consisted of 1,600 men, deployed in 50 files and 32 ranks.

The rest of Antiochus' army was a rogues' gallery of ancient nationalities, military roles and equipment. Appian and Livy give slightly conflicting details, but Livy is a bit more specific. A total of 1,500 *Gallograeci* ("Gaul-Greeks," Galatians – Celts who had settled in northern Turkey) infantry, who probably fought as a Celtic warband, were to the right of the phalanx, along with 3,000 cataphracts. "Cataphract" is from the Greek *kataphraktos*, "completely enclosed," super-heavy cavalry where both horse and rider are completely encased in metal, similar to the much later medieval knight. With these were 1,000 of Antiochus' "companion" cavalry, picked horsemen who served the king personally. Livy has them drawn at least partially from Medes (Persians). Beside these were another 16 elephants, and then the Silver Shields. The number of Silver Shields is not given, but some scholars argue they numbered 10,000, based on the number of Silver Shields Antiochus deployed at the Battle of Raphia in 217 BC, and

interpreting this to be the standard complement of this corps in the Seleucid army. On the Seleucid left, this arrangement was repeated, more or less – 1,500 Galatian infantry, another 200 Cappadocian troops sent by King Ariarathes IV Eusebes (“the Pious”), who was married to Antiochus’ daughter, Antiochis. Then 2,700 varied troops, another 3,000 cataphracts and 1,000 companion cavalry, made up of Syrians, Lydians and Phrygians. Livy finishes off his description with camel-mounted archers and scythed chariots:

In front of this mass of cavalry were scythe chariots and the camels, which they call dromedaries. Seated on these were Arabian archers provided with narrow swords four cubits [6 feet] long so that they could reach the enemy from the height on which they were perched. Beyond them again a mass of troops corresponding to those on the right wing, first Tarentines, then 2,500 Gallograeci cavalry, 1,000 newly enlisted Cretans, 1,500 Carians and Cilicians similarly armed, and the same number of Tralles. Then came 4,000 caetrati, Pisidians, Pamphylians and Lydians, next to these Cyrtian (Medean) and Elymaean (from Elam on the Persian Gulf) troops equal in number to those on the right wing, and finally 16 elephants a short distance away.

It was a fearsome mass that called to mind the army of “a thousand nations” that Xerxes I led against Leonidas and his Spartans. Antiochus himself commanded the right. His son Seleucus and his nephew Antipater were in command of the left. The center was led by three officers – Minio, Zeuxis, and Philip, Antiochus’ “master of elephants.”

A clinging mist had settled over the battlefield, which both Livy and Appian point out disadvantaged the Seleucids, but for different reasons. Appian points out that the mist obscured the Roman view of the sheer impressiveness of Antiochus’ battle line, though I think this would have been even more frightening, as the Romans would have seen sinister, half-realized shapes lurking in the fog. Given how superstitious they were, I could easily imagine them being frightened of vague shapes they couldn’t really see.

Livy, on the other hand, notes that the shorter frontage of the Roman line meant that all the Roman units could more or less see one another. But the great length of the Seleucid line (the phalanx and its dividing elephants alone would have covered more than a quarter mile) meant that the Seleucid units couldn’t see one another, and thus couldn’t use the troops next to them as a reference point to form a cohesive line. This meant that units could charge ahead or lag behind, without a good sense of how much of a gap they were leaving in the line. Further, Livy notes that most of the Romans were heavy infantry, armed with swords and javelins, which aren’t affected by moisture. Far more of the Seleucid troops were archers and slingers, with linen, leather, hemp or sinew bowstrings and slings, all of which would perform poorly when wet.

But the mist had little effect on Antiochus’ corps of scythed chariots, who opened the battle with a charge against the Roman right, held by Eumenes and the cavalry. Livy has a great description of the chariots’ design:

... from the yoke, on both sides of the pole, they had lances ten cubits [about 15 feet] long, projecting like horns, to transfix anything that came in their way. At each extremity of the yoke, two scythe blades projected, one on a line with the yoke, the other on its lower side, pointing to the

ground; the former to cut through anything that might come within its reach on the side, the other to catch such as fell, or endeavored to go under it. At each extremity of the axle of the wheels, two scythe-blades were fastened in the same manner.

It's a frightening description, and if you picture one of these things rigged up behind a team of horses and barreling down on you at a full gallop, when all you've got is a short sword, a couple of javelins and a shield, you can imagine it must have appeared daunting. Their role is apparent – to drive into the tight formations of infantry and break them up, killing the critical cohesion that ancient infantry required. But we have little evidence that these devices were actually effective. We have very few examples of scythed chariots being used to any effect (those that we do have come from Xenophon and Appian), and we know they were all but useless against Alexander's troops at Gaugamela in 331 BC, when the Macedonians simply shot them up with missile fire, and then parted ranks to let them through, sending troops to finish off the few survivors.

They didn't do much better here. Eumenes knew exactly how to fight against this attack, possibly from the collective experience of battles like Gaugamela. He ordered up the skirmishers, supported by some cavalry units, probably also skirmishers, with specific orders to target the horses, which make much larger targets than a person, and thus are easier to hit. He ordered these skirmishers to disperse as widely as possible, to make sure that their fire came in from all directions, and to avoid giving the chariots a fixed block of troops to target. This would have had the skirmishers arraying themselves in a broad, shallow crescent. If it curled in too tightly, they would have wound up hitting each other in the crossfire.

Horses gallop on average at around 25–30 miles per hour, but keep in mind these were yoked teams, hauling a chariot covered in metal scythes and possibly armor, not to mention the drivers and their equipment. If anything, they'd have moved more slowly than average, more than fast enough to do serious damage to the formed infantry if they reached them, but not nearly fast enough to close the distance before the skirmishers could get a few volleys off.

These volleys, by all accounts, were devastatingly effective. Horses would have been shot dead in their traces, skidding out in the dust and sending their carriages bolting into the air, their drivers flying. Wounded animals veered off course, crashing into the teams beside them, sending the carts tumbling. While Eumenes had ordered the skirmishers to aim for the horses, we have to guess that plenty of the missiles found the drivers, dropped where they stood by javelins or sling-stones. In the end, the attack was stopped cold, and the infantry didn't even have to mop up survivors.

If the missiles had simply massacred the chariot charge, it would have been better for Antiochus, but the outcome was much worse. Some of the horses, driven mad by their wounds and out of control, cut as tight an arc as the chariots would allow, and bolted back toward their own lines.

Now, remember the order of battle I presented above. We know that on Antiochus' left, behind the chariots, had been a huge mass of troops: auxiliary

infantry, cavalry, cataphracts and his camel-archers.

These all now watched in horror as the lumbering chariots, their sharp, long blades gleaming, came barreling toward them.

The camel-archers were the first to bolt. Now, I don't know if you have ever seen a camel run, but I have, and it is nowhere near as agile as a horse. They can move quickly, but they lumber, taking up a lot more space than a horse does. Appian points out that the cataphracts, slowed down by their heavy armor, had an even tougher time getting out of the way. The result was total chaos, as much of Antiochus' left wing fled in panic, and those that remained lost all semblance of order, scrambling to escape the wounded horses dragging the giant cutting machines behind them.

Eumenes, I can only imagine, couldn't believe his luck. If he was thinking of Gaugamela, he could not have helped but realize that he had actually exceeded Alexander's achievement in that battle, not only defeating the chariots, but utterly disrupting the entire left wing of the enemy army in the process.

The king of Pergamon was no fool. He immediately sounded the charge and led the cavalry in to make the most of the confusion. Three thousand horsemen plunged into the chaos, riding down fleeing enemy riders and running them through. Ancient cavalry fights were often whirling affairs, far less dependent on unit cohesion than infantry combat, but that didn't mean cohesion counted for nothing. A horseman cut off on his own could be much more easily surrounded and attacked from the side or rear. The chaotic and broken Seleucid left wing had lost all semblance of order, and so was easy pickings for Eumenes and the Roman and allied cavalry.

Panic in warfare is like a highly communicable illness. Leaders have a short window to encourage troops before it begins to spread through their entire army. And once panicked, troops are notoriously difficult to rally. History is rife with stories of soldiers lashing out against their officers in panic, perhaps the most famous being Julius Caesar's defeat at Dyrrhachium in 48 BC, when a fleeing Roman standard-bearer attacked Caesar when the leader tried to stop him from running. Caesar was supposedly saved by one of his German bodyguard, who cut off the man's arm.

The panic began to spread now, moving from the collapsing left flank into the central phalanx. The Romans, seeing their chance, ordered the legions to advance, throwing their javelins and moving into contact with the blocks of pike men. Disordered and terrified, the phalanx began to give ground.

The elephants, which had so badly dogged the Romans in the Pyrrhic War, were little trouble now, for the veteran legionaries had long experience of working both with and against them. They knew now to stay back from them, peppering them with javelins and darting in to slash at their legs with their swords.

Eumenes was probably thanking every god of Olympus for his good fortune, the shock of his luck still making him giddy even as he laid about with his spear. One turned chariot attack and suddenly he was dominating his opponent's entire flank! This could well end the battle before it even really started. Surely it couldn't

be this simple. Surely it couldn't be this easy ... it wasn't.

The Charge of the Heavy Brigade – The Battle Turns

I like to imagine Eumenes reining in his horse, sawing his head to the left as horns sounded and shouts erupted from Antiochus' right wing.

It was comical, really. While Eumenes was charging into Antiochus' left with the Roman right, Antiochus had sent out a charge against the Roman left from the Seleucid right. At the head of that charge was Antiochus and his companion cavalry, along with 3,000 cataphracts. Unlike the disastrous left, these horsemen were properly organized and formed up, and they hit the Roman line like a tidal wave, bringing the full weight of man, horse, weapons and armor to bear.

I mentioned earlier that the Romans had anchored their left wing on the river, judging that the deep water would keep Antiochus from turning their flank. However, they had left a weak spot in the line right along the riverbank, where just four cavalry squadrons had been placed with no reserve. Antiochus had his cavalry charge punch through at that point, and the lighter Roman horsemen were helpless to resist. Even the super-heavy cataphracts were more mobile than infantry, and soon Antiochus' horsemen were wedged between the Roman battle line and the river, pressing the Roman right not only at the front but on the flank as well. Again, panic spread like an infection, and the Roman infantry, seeing the horsemen flee, and hearing the shouts and seeing the tossing plumes not only before them, but off to their left as well, believed their position to be hopeless. It was one thing to fight bravely against tough odds, it was another to throw your life away when it would do no good, being little more than a speed bump for the Seleucid cataphracts on their way to glory. Better to run, get your bearings, fall back in with another unit and come back to fight later.

And run they did, the Roman left collapsing at roughly the same time as the Seleucid left. Here it was Antiochus running down routing troops from horseback, surrounding and killing the cavalry and spearing infantry in the back. The fleeing troops ran all the way back to the Roman fortified camp, and the Seleucid cavalry likely didn't pursue them too close to the walls, for fear of coming under missile fire or being attacked by the camp guards. The Roman camp was under the command of a tribune named Marcus Aemilius, and he raced out to rally the fleeing troops.

Marcus was either tough as nails, or else had the respect of his troops, because he somehow managed to stop the men from fleeing and demanded that they turn around, form up and get back in the fight. But while Marcus had been able to stop them, they were unwilling to face the armored horsemen who had broken them so easily. After they ignored his warnings, Marcus finally called out his men, some 2,000 Macedonian and Thracian allies who had been assigned to guard the camp, to make examples out of some of the runaways. These began cutting down the fugitives, slashing at them and herding them in the direction of the enemy, in a move that evokes the Soviet Commissars during the desperate

fighting for Stalingrad in 1941.

After a few Roman bodies hit the dirt, the fleeing troops realized that Marcus wasn't making idle threats. They could either face *possible* death at the hands of the Seleucids, or *certain* death at the hands of their own tribune. "*The greater fear now overcame the lesser*," Livy says, in a great turn of phrase. It was an easy choice to make, and they made it, forming up and turning around to meet the Seleucid cavalry. They were joined by Marcus and his 2,000 troops, and together they met Antiochus' cavalry head on, and at least stopped them from advancing on the camp, or worse, riding into the Roman backfield and striking any unit at will from the rear. They were soon joined by Attalus, Eumenes' brother, with 200 horsemen drawn off from Eumenes' successful charge. With the Seleucid left in full flight, he had seen the collapse of the Roman left, and figured he could be of better use there.

He was right. Antiochus saw that the panicked mass of fleeing Romans had found their spines and formed a battle line, and were now reinforced by 2,000 infantry and 200 cavalry. His hope of a breakthrough had evaporated, and he was now in danger of being cut off from his own army, caught between the Roman line and the river. He had a short window now where he could ride back out through the gap he'd created.

He took it, wheeling his cavalry, and riding off the field.

In the center, the legion and the phalanx were continuing to slog it out. Here, Livy and Appian's stories diverge. Livy has the Seleucid phalanx simply being flattened, but I like Appian's version of events better. Before I get into that, though, I want to mention that neither writer mentions the Silver Shields again after listing them as part of the battle line. What does this mean? Nobody knows. Possibly it means that they played little to no role in the battle. Maybe it means that they formed up with the rest of the phalanx and were counted as part of that in Livy and Appian's descriptions. Or perhaps they were part of Antiochus' flanking maneuver on the Roman left. I don't like this interpretation, because heavily armored phalangites in formation wouldn't have been able to move quickly enough to support a cavalry unit, and they certainly wouldn't have been able to just roll out when Marcus rallied the fugitives. If I had a formed elite unit of phalangites on the enemy's left flank with a river at their backs and no way to break contact easily, I sure as hell wouldn't pull them back. It's likely that the Silver Shields weren't with Antiochus when he charged, and rather were formed up with the rest of the phalanx, probably on the honored right-hand side.

Whatever the position of the Silver Shields, Appian describes the fate of the phalanx in painful detail. With the cavalry driven off on both the left and the right, the Romans had the run of the battlefield, and were able to circle fully around Antiochus' line. Being attacked from front and rear simultaneously meant almost certain death for the phalanx, so they did the only thing they could: they drew into a huge, hollow square, presenting pikes on all four sides, and held on.

The hollow square formation was made famous in the Napoleonic Wars, when infantry used it to ward off cavalry charges. Perhaps the best known example of this is the disastrous cavalry charge of Marshal Michel Ney, torn apart by British volley fire at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 when his horses refused to charge home into the lines of fixed bayonets.

But while hollow squares in both ancient and Napoleonic times were excellent defensive formations, almost impossible to charge, they were also virtually immobile, and since they could only barely move, highly vulnerable to missile fire.

You can picture the horrible standoff that followed. The Seleucid square, bristling with pikes, would have had a tough time keeping the complicated formation while moving. We know the phalanx was 16,000 strong at the outset of the battle, and this likely doesn't count the Silver Shields and the other "peltasts," assuming these were phalangites and not skirmishers. Now, let's assume a ridiculously high number of casualties at this point in the battle – 20 percent. That still leaves us with over 10,000 people facing in four different directions. Not to mention the wounded in the center, along with animals, plunder, standards and broken equipment. Now, imagine trying to get all those people and all that gear to *move* in a given direction, with 25 percent of them marching forward, 25 percent of them marching backwards, and 50 percent of them crab-stepping sideways. This is a recipe for disaster as the cohesion on which everyone's lives depends breaks apart.

Appian comes out and says as much: "... *they did not advance, because they were foot-soldiers and heavily armed, and saw that the enemy were mounted. Most of all they feared to relax their close formation lest they might not readily bring it together again.*"

Appian's statement makes me wonder if the phalanx had adopted the *synaspismos* or "locked shields" formation that Asclepiodotus mentions. I discuss it in chapter I, and make mention of the fact that reenactors have discovered it is completely defensive, requiring the phalangites to raise their pikes and not use them, due to the incredibly tight space needed to overlap the smaller phalangite shields.

So the phalanx didn't advance, but neither did the Romans charge them. Far from the phalanx crumbling in panic, as Livy says, Appian has the Romans genuinely frightened to engage. "*The Romans did not come to close quarters nor approach them because they feared the discipline, the solidity, and the desperation of this veteran corps ...*" Specifically calling them out for their experience makes me think I'm on the right track for assuming the Silver Shields were formed up with the rest.

Instead, the Romans stood off and threw javelins, slung stones and fired arrows into the tightly packed, immobile mass of Seleucid infantry.

It must have been hell. With the enemy on all sides, there was absolutely nowhere to run. In fact, to move at all would create a gap that would spell certain death for you and your battle brothers. The Seleucid phalangite had some of the

best protection available to the ancient infantryman. It is worth recounting this now, because it was never more critical than it was at Magnesia: a bronze helmet, linen or bronze cuirass, greaves and a shield. In addition to this was the thick forest canopy of thousands of pikes, which could do a great job of deflecting incoming missile fire.

For a short time, this would do the trick, keeping the phalangites defended long enough for them to come to grips with the enemy and to decide the contest face to face. But at Magnesia, the phalanx was stuck, and the Romans had all the time in the world to set up their shots, take them, glean arrows, sling stones and javelins from the battlefield to use again, and get fresh ammunition from their own camp.

Here and there, a phalangite would cry out and collapse as a javelin punched through his shield, pinning his arm to his side, or drop silently as a well-placed sling stone rocketed past his cheek piece and smashed his face in. I've heard writers compare the sound of missile fire in an ancient battle to the patter of a hard rain, but we're talking about stones and metal spikes colliding with bronze. It must have sounded more like a thunder of hailstones striking a field of pots and pans, a thousand car crashes at once, so loud that it probably left the ears ringing. Moment by moment, the ranks of the phalangites thinned, and the square shrunk.

Still, they held on. Who knows what they were thinking? That the Romans would run out of ammunition? That Antiochus would rally and ride back to rescue them? That their enemy would eventually tire of this undignified slow death and give them a stand-up fight? The bravery and tenacity of these last phalangites is stunning.

At last, Appian has them falling back, step by shuffling step, toward their camp. The square formation was the only thing keeping them alive, and so their progress must have been painfully slow as they worked to preserve it, taking casualties with every torturous inch.

They might have reached the safety of their camp if it hadn't been for a fatal flaw in their defenses. I mentioned the elephants that Antiochus had stationed at intervals between the units of the phalanx. These had been drawn into the center of the hollow square. Also remember that these were the larger Indian elephants, which meant that they towered over the phalangites.

Big. Slow. Easy targets.

It would have been impossible to incline the pikes to give them any real protection without sacrificing the protection that the phalangites themselves were relying on. I believe they left the elephants alone, trusting in the animals' armor and their thick hides to see them through.

It was a bad gamble, and the Romans eventually figured out that they would be better off targeting the giant beasts than the much smaller men. The animals, like their masters, held on for a time, but eventually the steady rain of steel and stone paid off for the Romans. One of the elephants, driven mad by the pain of its wounds, went on a rampage, and the rest of the herd followed. The sources

aren't clear if the elephants' rampage actually took them into the phalangites and physically broke up the formation by trampling their own soldiers, or if it was merely the chaos and noise of an elephant rampaging nearby that triggered the panic reaction that we already saw swing this battle first one way, and then the other.

What is clear is that the square broke, order collapsed, and the phalangites bolted, running for the safety of their camp. It was, of course, the worst possible thing they could have done, and they paid dearly for it. Where the strength of the formation had sheltered them from enemy missiles and blades, as individuals, and particularly as individuals with their backs to the enemy, they were completely defenseless. Even worse, they were surrounded by light cavalry, the fastest and most maneuverable troops in the ancient world. A big part of the cavalry's role in ancient battles was to run down routing enemy troops and make sure they didn't rally to fight again.

This they did, spearing and trampling the running phalangites, who were weighed down by their linen cuirasses and greaves, even if they threw away their helmets and shields.

The battle was over. Once again, the legion had won.

Aftermath

Magnesia is a legion versus phalanx battle that is very light on description of the legion battling the phalanx. But it does provide a lot of other critical insights into how these formations fought, and how they fought one another.

The first is "combined arms." This is a modern military term used to describe the interplay of different troop types and roles in a battle. A good example of combined arms in a modern context would be attack helicopters providing close air support to an infantry attack. When we talk about combined arms in the ancient world, we are usually talking about the mutually supporting roles of infantry, skirmishers, light and heavy cavalry, artillery, elephants, chariots and other more exotic troop variations like camel riders or even war dogs which the Romans began using in the 2nd century AD. Magnesia is a really good illustration of effective combined arms on the Roman side. Lucius (or really Ahenobarbus) seems to have understood that his army only really needed three components: cavalry to cover his flanks, skirmishers to soften up the enemy, and – above all – his legions, to charge and break the Seleucids. Some may give Eumenes' Pergamene horsemen, Hellenistic cavalry, who would have fought differently from the Romans, the credit for the victory on the Seleucid left, but you have to remember that a substantial portion of the cavalry force would have been mounted Romans, so we cannot even credit the Romans with a particularly diverse mounted force.

Antiochus, meanwhile, seems to have made the mistake of trying to throw the entire kitchen sink at the enemy, with disastrous results. In this case, his troop diversity was over the top, and the unexpected impact of the routed scythed

chariots is a glaring example of the risk of introducing such an unpredictable element into the battlefield. The same can be said of the elephants, whose panic proved the decisive factor in the final rout of the Seleucid phalanx.

In fact, the first description we have of the Seleucid phalanx fighting effectively is when it is no longer trying to interoperate with all these various troop types. It is most powerful when it is alone and in its hollow square, utterly impenetrable with its bristling pikes, able to cling to life in the face of the overwhelming defeat of the rest of the Seleucid army. In reality, in spite of having the phalanx surrounded and completely cut off from support, the Romans still had to resort to agitating the elephants in order to break up the formation, and it was only after they accomplished this that they were able to defeat them. Let me repeat the quote from Appian: “*The Romans did not come to close quarters nor approach them because they feared the discipline, the solidity, and the desperation of this veteran corps ...*” Think about that. Even in clear victory, the legions were frightened to try to come to grips with the Seleucid phalanx. By the time of Magnesia, the Romans had been fighting against the Hellenistic phalanx for nearly a century, and had already scored notable victories against it at Beneventum and Cynoscephalae. We even see the legionaries showing their fearlessness in the face of Antiochus’ larger Indian elephants. This courage was driven by experience, and their caution against the phalanx was driven by similar experience. They had learned to treat the elephants with contempt, and the phalanx with respect. It is perhaps in how the legion and the phalanx *didn’t* fight, in the case of Magnesia, that we learn the most about both.

Another reminder that casualty figures, like army sizes, are routinely exaggerated in ancient accounts, but by any estimation, it was an absolute slaughter. Livy gives us the staggering figure of 50,000 Seleucid infantry killed, and 3,000 cavalry, with 1,400 prisoners and 15 elephants captured. This is the same number that Livy estimates were killed at Cannae, and is no doubt much too high, but Appian confirms it. He also confirms Livy’s estimate of just 300 Roman infantry killed. Appian also confirms Livy on the cavalry losses, 24 Roman horsemen, and 15 of Eumenes’ mounted Pergamenes. This leads me to believe that both men were working from the same source in composing their writings, and not that the figures are accurate.

No matter the specific casualty figures, it was a disaster for Antiochus and effectively broke Seleucid power. The Seleucid king fled to Apamea (modern day Dinar, Turkey) and from there he sent envoys to Lucius asking for peace terms. At this point, Africanus had recovered and rejoined his brother, and Appian has him setting the terms, which were brutal.

Antiochus was to abandon all his holdings in Europe, give back any Pergamene territory acquired by deals with Attalus I, and abandon all of Asia west of the Taurus mountains. He was to give up all his remaining war elephants and agree not to recruit any more. He also had to scuttle his navy, save for 12 ships authorized by the Romans (he could build more if he was attacked). He could not hire mercenaries from Roman territory, nor harbor fugitives from

Rome. Last, he had to pay an indemnity of 500 “Euboic talents” of silver immediately, another 2,500 when the senate ratified the treaty, and then 1,000 talents a year for the next 12 years.

Figuring out how much money this was is a nightmare, and helps us arrive at a figure that, like everything in ancient history, is more guess than anything else. Appian tells us the Euboic talent is equal to 7,000 *drachmai*, which matches the reckoning of the Attic talent. We can match the two based on passages in Herodotus and from the 2nd century AD Greek scholar Julius Pollux. This conflicts with the measurements of the turn of the 2nd century AD Roman teacher and writer Claudius Aelianus, who gives the ratio at roughly 72:70, with the Euboic talent being heavier. An Attic talent was about 26 kilograms of silver, a little more than 57 pounds. As of today (April 8, 2017), silver is selling for \$581.29 per kilogram. This would mean that the down payment was \$7,556,770, with another \$37,783,850 due on ratification, and \$15,113,540 a year for the next 12 years. This would be even higher if we reckon by Aelian’s heavier weight of silver in the Euboic talent. This may seem low by today’s standards where a single F-35 fighter costs just under \$100 million, but it doesn’t take into account the purchasing power of the equivalent of a modern dollar in the ancient world, a whole other complicated and contentious topic of study. Suffice to say that Antiochus’ 1,000 talent annual payment would feel more like a \$600 million dollar payment by modern standards.

Antiochus and his children sought to deal with the financial pressure of this indemnity by squeezing the Jews living in the bounds of their empire. The Old Testament – Daniel 11:20 – speaks of Antiochus’ son Seleucus IV Philopator when it says “*Then in his place one will arise who will send an oppressor through the jewel of his kingdom; yet within a few days he will be shattered, though not in anger nor in battle.*” The passage is likely referring to Seleucus’ sending of his minister Heliodorus to seize the treasury of the Jewish temple, referenced again in 2 Maccabees 3:21–28:21. Polybius also backs up the assertion that the financial pressure forced this move.

Antiochus also surrendered 20 hostages picked by the Romans against his compliance with the treaty, to include his son Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The treaty was formalized in 188 BC, and effectively ended the Seleucids as a real power in the ancient world. By the following year, Antiochus was dead, and it would be the Antigonids’ turn once again to defy Rome, the last of the successor kingdoms to do so and with predictable results.



IX

PYDNA, 168 BC: THE FALL OF THE ANTIGONIDS

Yes, if I had thy youth; but many victories teach me the mistakes of the vanquished, and forbid me to join battle, immediately after a march, with a phalanx which is already drawn up and completely formed.

Lucius Aemilius Paullus to his captain Nasica on the eve of the battle From Plutarch, *The Life of Aemilius*

The Battle of Pydna marked the end of the Antigonid dynasty and broke the power of Macedon once and for all. Of all the successor kingdoms, the Antigonids were the nearest to the font of Greek culture, occupying the original territory of Macedon that had given rise to Alexander himself. With the defeat at Pydna, the core of Alexander the Great's vast empire, forged in little more than a decade of frantic campaigning, was snuffed out.

Pydna was the classic legion versus phalanx battle. The battle lacked the mitigating factors of the other battles we've examined in previous chapters: the darkness and fortifications at Beneventum, the stampeding elephants at Magnesia, the rain and fog at Cynoscephalae. It is fitting that the ultimate and final legion versus phalanx conflict should be a simple head-to-head stand-up fight.

Even better, Pydna is a great story, full of the colorful characters and dramatic flair that make it, in many ways, stranger than anything my most fevered imagination could ever invent for the novels I've written.

The Antigonid Dynasty and the Prelude to the Third Macedonian War

King Philip V of Macedon's long career of anti-Roman campaigning was at last concluded with his decisive defeat at Cynoscephalae in 197 BC, as we have already seen. While the battle effectively ended any serious challenge to Roman influence in Greece, it in no way dampened Macedonian enthusiasm for the contest.

When we say “ancient Greece,” we’re usually thinking of Greece proper in the “Golden Age” of the 5th century. We’re talking about the city-states of Attica, Boeotia and the Peloponnese – Sparta, Athens, Corinth, Thebes. Even today, Macedonia is a separate country, far to the north of those places. The ancient Greeks saw the Macedonians as upcountry yokels, unsophisticated bumpkins who were barely more civilized than the bestial Thracians or Illyrians. The Macedonians saw the Greeks of Attica and the Peloponnese as effete and decadent, pampered wimps whose city ways had made them weak.

But the conquests of Philip II and Alexander the Great had linked Greece and Macedon in a fundamental way, and their cultures had intermingled to the point where many Macedonians thought of themselves as the rightful rulers of Greek lands and the custodians of Greek language and culture. In the 5th century, this link was accepted enough to allow Macedonians to compete in the Olympic Games, as they were considered “Greek” enough to qualify. Alexander the Great was descended from the Argaeds, a line of kings who traced their origins to the Greek city of Argos, a connection of which they were enormously proud. To Philip II, and those who came after him, the thought of barbarians ruling the motherland of Greece stuck in the craw, and Philip V’s inability to drive them out must have been a source of great bitterness.

The Romans, ironically enough, probably felt the same way. Flamininus wasn’t the only philhellene among the Roman aristocracy. Many Romans saw the Macedonians as a separate, northern people who had invaded and occupied Greece in Alexander’s time. Now, years after Alexander’s death, they continued to meddle, and it was for Rome to intervene on behalf of their Greek allies and neighbors. The Greek city-states, meanwhile, played this to their advantage, aligning with the Macedonians or the Romans as best suited their interests.

And here the story takes a turn into reality TV territory, albeit slightly deadlier. Philip V had four children by his Argive wife, Polycratia. Philip V was said to have seduced her during a visit to his court, and then poisoned her husband and her father-in-law. Philip V’s daughter Apame was married off to the king of Bithynia, in modern day Turkey. His three sons were Perseus, Demetrius and Philippus, the first two of whom have major roles to play in the story surrounding Pydna.

Demetrius was just a boy when Roman consul Titus Quinctius Flamininus defeated Philip V at Cynoscephalae. Among the many humiliating victory conditions Flamininus imposed on Philip was the stipulation that Demetrius be sent to Rome as a hostage for his father’s good behavior.

Demetrius is an interesting choice of hostage, because he wasn’t Philip’s eldest son. Philip’s son Perseus, named for the legendary Greek hero who beheaded Medusa and saved Andromeda from the sea monster Cetus, which many know as “the Kraken” from the famous *Clash of the Titans* film, was the eldest and the heir to his father’s kingdom. The sources are not clear on why Demetrius was selected as a hostage. It could be due to the fact that Flamininus thought that he could better influence a younger and more impressionable prince, but there may also be

truth in both Livy and Plutarch's claims that Perseus wasn't Philip's legitimate son. Livy tells us that Perseus was the son of "*a concubine*" who "*prostituted her person,*" but provides no other details. Plutarch speaks of "*a statement*" that Perseus was the son of an Argive seamstress named Gnathaenion, who was taken by Polycratia on his birth and passed off as her own son. Why Polycratia might have done this is unclear. Perhaps Gnathaenion had been Philip's mistress, or the "concubine" Livy mentions. It's interesting to note that Gnathaenion is listed as one of the great courtesans in the collection of banquet speeches by the turn of the 2nd century AD Greek writer Athenaeus of Naucratis, and associated with Hellenistic kings to boot. However, Athenaeus has her as Athenian, not Argive.

At any rate, Demetrius went off to Rome. This is precisely the same scenario we saw with Alexander the Great's father, Philip II, who was a hostage in the court of the Theban general Epaminondas. And just as with Philip and Epaminondas, Demetrius was greatly influenced by his time in Rome, and left to return to Macedon at least half a Roman. To give you an idea of how close hostages could be to their captors, look at Philip II's reaction after crushing the Thebans at the Battle of Chaeronea in 338 BC. He wept at the sight of the heaped corpses of the Sacred Band, choking out the words "*Perish any man who suspects that these men either did or suffered anything unseemly*" through his tears. The Thebans were his dedicated enemies, and he slaughtered them, but they were also his childhood friends and companions from his years as a hostage, which made his victory as bitter as it was sweet.

The same kind of sympathies were likely kindled toward the Romans in Demetrius, who was popular with the Romans and honored by the senate. Five years later, Philip had regained Rome's favor by assisting it in its fight with against Antiochus the Great, Antiochus was finally defeated at the Battle of Magnesia, and Demetrius was sent home.

But the Demetrius who returned from captivity wasn't the same boy who had left. The years had changed him, and he no longer shared his father's view that Rome was the oppressor of the Greeks, and that Macedon's duty was to liberate the peninsula. Worse, sycophants in the Macedonian court crowded around Demetrius, as he was clearly the favorite of the incredibly powerful and influential Roman Republic. The result was a secondary, informal court that sprang up around Demetrius.

Demetrius also returned with Roman ambassadors who had further demands for Philip, notably that he withdraw his garrisons from Thrace, the territory that Alexander had first subdued immediately upon ascending to the throne after his father's assassination. This was a stinging humiliation for Philip, who had no choice but to comply.

Worse still, rumors began to spread in Philip's court that Demetrius, though not his eldest son, was his eldest *legitimate* son, which meant he would surely succeed to the throne on his father's death.

As you might imagine, this did not sit well with Philip's eldest son, Perseus, who was Philip's presumptive heir and had inherited his father's hatred for Rome,

his humiliation over the defeat at Cynoscephalae, and his belief in the righteousness of the Antigonids as the guardians of the cultural patrimony of ancient Greece.

Perseus proved himself to be his father's equal in ruthlessness, deviousness, and willingness to go the distance to achieve his goal. This was nothing less than his father's – Greece under Antigonid rule. Perseus would command the Macedonian army at Pydna, leading the same phalanxes that Alexander had used to conquer Persia and unite the known world under a single banner for the first time in history. Perseus would bring the baggage of his father's defeat, along with his dreams of a glorious future to the battlefield.

“A much more lasting glory”: Aemilius Paullus

Roman consul Lucius Aemilius Paullus Macedonicus was nearly 60 years old when popular acclaim forced him to take the leadership of the consular army that would square off against Perseus' phalanxes at Pydna. Prior to that, he'd had a distinguished military career and was widely regarded as an upstanding Roman and a good leader. Like Scipio's "Africanus," the "Macedonicus" was added after Pydna. It means "Conqueror of Macedon." It was customary to grant such titles to leaders after major victories.

Like Perseus' father, Aemilius' father had suffered a reversal in war. Unlike Perseus's father, the reversal was fatal. Aemilius' father, confusingly also named Lucius Aemilius Paullus, was consul at the Battle of Cannae in 216 BC, against Carthage's military genius Hannibal Barca. We don't have details on the manner of Aemilius' father's end, only that he was killed in the battle.

The ancient sources don't talk about how this impacted on the younger Aemilius, but we do know this: Roman aristocratic families were tightly knit. The *pater familias* (the male head of the family) held a position of almost godlike power, including life or death rule over other family members. It is likely that Aemilius, thinking of his father killed in so famous a disaster as Cannae, was galvanized to right the stain on his family honor, to avenge the *gens Aemilii* against, albeit not the same enemy, at least an enemy of Rome.

Whether it was because of his father's famous death or not, Aemilius turned out to be a driven young man. He won a landslide election to the office of *aedile* – responsible for the maintenance of temples, the throwing of games and general public order, one of the lower rungs on the *cursus honorum*. He was later inducted into the college of augurs, Roman priests who took omens by watching the flights of birds.

Taking omens, like every other aspect of Roman ritual, was meticulous. Each ritual had to be performed correctly down to the minutest detail and in the correct order. This fastidiousness would come into play later on, as we will see, but its immediate result was that Aemilius was a by-the-book military commander, a stern disciplinarian who treated his soldiers severely. Paullus ran a tight ship, and while it gave him victory at Pydna, it would come back to bite

him later, when his angry troops made it difficult for him to celebrate a triumph.

His first command was in Spain, as a praetor, a combination title that could refer to a senior magistrate but could also refer to an army commander. There, he campaigned against the Lusitanians, a “Celtiberian” (Indo-European) people, and enjoyed enormous success, laying the groundwork for the Roman success in the “Fiery War” of Lusitanian resistance that followed from 155 to 139 BC. His own son Fabius Maximus served in this same war, defeating the famous Lusitanian leader Viriathus. Plutarch notes that Aemilius showed a good grasp of how to use terrain, something that would come in handy against the phalanx, and credits him with victory in two major battles with a total of 30,000 enemy casualties that resulted in 250 cities voluntarily opening their gates to Roman rule. Plutarch also notes that Aemilius abstained from plundering the conquered territories, denying himself a very lucrative source of income common among soldiers of the day. Captured booty was one of the prime incentives to soldiering in the ancient world. We have to raise a skeptical eyebrow at Plutarch here. Aemilius hailed from one of the richest and most powerful families in all of Rome. It’s easy to be charitable when money is no object.

So far, Aemilius appears driven, competent and incorruptible, but we get a rare glimpse of the man behind the mask in his divorce of his first wife. Papiria was the daughter of a former Roman consul, who was by all accounts beautiful and personable, well liked by all who knew her. She was not barren, common grounds for divorce in the ancient world, having given Aemilius two daughters and two sons, including the famous Fabius Maximus, whom I have already mentioned, and the even more renowned Scipio Aemilianus, who oversaw the final destruction of Carthage in 146 BC. Aemilius’ friends were upset when he put her aside and asked him why he intended to divorce her. Aemilius is said to have taken off his shoe and shown it to them, asking them if it looked like it fit well and comfortably. It might, he said, but the fact was that if it pinched him or bothered him, only he would know, and carry the discomfort of it alone. It was the little things that tore them apart, Aemilius explained, a thousand tiny transgressions building up over the years. It’s a rare glimpse into the inner workings of an ancient marriage, and both endearing and saddening in how similar it is to the experience of many married couples today. Aemilius married a second time and had two more sons, but the names of neither this new wife nor their children are known, and both boys died while still children.

Elected consul, he was put in command of an expedition against the Ingauni, another Indo-European people who lived on Italy’s northwest coast in the shadow of the Alps. The tribe was a satellite of the powerful Ligures, who gave their name to the region, which is still called Liguria today. The Ingauni had allied themselves with Rome’s enemy Carthage during the Second Punic War, for which they paid dearly. Aemilius crushed them, despite the fact that their army was five times the size of his own. Aemilius wielded his authority wisely, and no sooner had he conquered the Ingauni, razed their fortifications and liberated their prisoners, than he returned their towns to them unharmed, not displacing

them, butchering them or selling them into slavery, as was frequently the fate of losers of ancient battles. Aemilius showed some strategic genius here, in that the Ingauni, now chastened and “friendly” to Rome, provided a buffer against migrating Gauls who threatened Italy from the north.

Victorious again, Aemilius ran for consul a second time and lost. He took that as his cue to exit the limelight and attend to his duties as an augur and father. Plutarch notes that Aemilius was a lover of Greek culture, and that he spared no expense to ensure that his children were tutored by Greek scholars. It was another thing he had in common with Perseus. Both men would have smarted from the defeats suffered by their fathers, and both men probably saw themselves as true devotees of Hellenism, eager to liberate the object of their veneration from the tyrant on the other side of the battlefield.

Perseus Ascendant – The Outbreak of the Third Macedonian War

Pydna was the ultimate legion versus phalanx battle, and a watershed event that permanently shifted the balance of power in Greece and the surrounding country. In order to fully understand how the battle unfolded, and why it was even fought in the first place, we must first understand the motivations of one of the principal commanders, Perseus of Macedon. In understanding Perseus, we will see how the Third Macedonian War began, and the chain of events that led to this singular and historic battle.

Philip V chafed under the humiliating terms that ended the Second Macedonian War. He was out thousands of talents of silver. He had been forced to disband most of his navy and much of his army. He held his kingdom at Rome’s pleasure. And now his son Demetrius was returned to him with clear Roman sympathies.

Philip began to rebuild his army in secret, in the Macedonian highlands far from the main roads where they might be seen. He managed to amass a sizable armory, arms and armor for 30,000 troops and enough money to hire 10,000 mercenaries and keep them in service for a decade. He bided his time and made his preparations, and watched for the moment when he could return to Greece and make the Romans pay for what they had done to him.

Demetrius’ popularity, coupled by his favor in the eyes of Rome, made Perseus seriously worried for his position as heir to the Macedonian throne. He decided that action needed to be taken, so he began a whisper campaign among his father’s inner circle, and with Philip himself. Demetrius was an easy target. He was Rome’s favorite, the “good” Macedonian who could be relied upon to advance their interests. “*The Romans possess his heart and soul,*” Livy quotes Perseus, talking about his half-brother, “*though they have given us back his body.*” Demetrius exacerbated the issue by constantly defending Rome among his father’s courtiers, whom Perseus had encouraged to needle him. They kept after Demetrius day and night, comparing Macedon to Rome, or criticizing the Romans, and Demetrius rose to the bait every single time. Of course Philip saw

and heard all this, and began to exclude Demetrius from all his counsels, leaning more and more heavily on Perseus.

That Perseus wanted what was best for his country, we have no reason to doubt, but it is also very convenient that his tearing down of Demetrius helped allay his greatest fear – that as he was not Philip's "trueborn" son, he would be passed over for the throne even though he was the eldest, and that the crown would go to Demetrius.

Matters came to a head when Demetrius and Perseus commanded opposing units in a mock battle held during a military purification rite. Livy describes the sham fight as not being sham at all, with both sides viewing it as a symbolic contest for the crown, and with many wounded on both sides despite using blunted weapons. Demetrius won, and Perseus petulantly refused to attend his victory banquet, holding his own apart.

However, Perseus did send a spy to Demetrius' banquet. This spy was discovered and badly beaten by Demetrius' supporters without Demetrius' knowledge. Demetrius then suggested that they go visit his brother's banquet to try to make amends for embarrassing him in the mock battle. Demetrius' supporters, knowing they had just attacked one of Perseus' men, concealed swords under their tunics.

When word reached Perseus that they were coming, and coming armed, he made a great show of bolting the door and denying them entrance. Demetrius, who still had no idea what was going on, stood outside shouting to be let in before returning to his own home.

Perseus went to his father the following morning, claiming that Demetrius had come to his home with an armed band, deliberately, to murder him, rather than it all being just a misunderstanding. Demetrius defended himself eloquently, but the damage was done. Philip did not punish Demetrius, but Demetrius became estranged from his father, and while he specifically avoided all mention of Rome from now on, it was too late. Perseus was always at his father's side, whispering in his ear of Demetrius' treachery.

At last, Didas, one of Philip's generals and governor of Paeonia – modern day Macedonia and Bulgaria – insinuated himself into Demetrius' confidence, reporting back to Perseus all his half-brother said. Demetrius made the mistake of trusting Didas, and complaining about how much he was hated in his father's court, he raised the idea of fleeing to Rome. His path would take him through the territory that Didas governed, and Didas promised to help. Didas then turned around and told Perseus everything. Perseus promptly told Philip, and even went so far as to produce a forged letter from Titus Quinctius Flamininus, defending Demetrius.

This appeared to do the trick, and Philip, at long last, decided that Demetrius was an enemy of the kingdom and had him executed. It was done secretly, with poison. Philip knew how beloved Demetrius was in Rome, and wanted to avoid antagonizing them until his military preparations were ready. As Demetrius lay in bed suffering horribly under the effects of the poison, Didas had two thugs enter

the room and smother him under his own blankets, just to be sure.

If Livy and Plutarch are to be believed, the tragedy now reached epic proportions. Philip had done what he felt the burden of his crown demanded, but his father's heart suffered. Ripped apart by grief over the death of his son, he was steadily sidelined. Perseus, now the undisputed heir, was treated as *de facto* king, and Philip found himself more and more isolated.

The final blow came when Philip's friend Antigonus untangled Perseus' plot, and revealed that the letter from Titus Quinctius Flamininus had been a forgery. Philip ordered some of the major participants in the plot arrested, and named Antigonus as his successor. He then undertook a tour of his kingdom, introducing Antigonus and recommending him to the leading men of the country. The remorse and depression he felt over Demetrius' killing finally overcame him during this tour, and he died of grief in Amphipolis in 179 BC.

Antigonus was away on an errand at the time, and Philip's physician sent the news of his death secretly to Perseus, who took possession of his father's throne and had Antigonus put to death. The story reads like a ... well, like a Greek tragedy in the tradition of Aeschylus or Sophocles.

Perseus immediately sent an overture of friendship to Rome, asking them to recognize him as Macedon's new king. No sooner had this overture been made than he moved to advance his father's plans of confronting Rome, cementing alliances and consolidating his forces. He concluded treaties with the neighboring kingdom of Epirus, and with several of the mountain tribes of Thrace and Illyria. He married Loadike, the daughter of Seleucus IV, the king of the Seleucids, and the son of Antiochus the Great whom we saw defeated at Magnesia.

Polybius gives some idea of how Perseus began to realize his father's ambition of ruling Greece, and how it led to renewed conflict with Rome. Perseus marched with his army against the Dolopians, a northern Greek people who refused to submit to his wishes. He then turned, and still at the head of his army, marched over 100 miles across Greece to consult the famous oracle at Delphi. This visit raised a general alarm in Greece that didn't escape Rome's notice.

Around 172 BC, Delphi was the scene of one of the Third Macedonian Wars' major *casus belli*. Eumenes II, whom we saw performing so heroically at the Battle of Magnesia, had spoken passionately before the senate in favor of war with Perseus. Perseus, enraged, engaged Evander of Crete, along with three Macedonian assassins to make an attempt on his life. The killers botched the job, rolling stones down on top of Eumenes and wounding him. Eumenes' companions fled, and the sole Aetolian member of Eumenes' entourage, Pantaleon, stayed to protect him. If the assassins had descended from the heights where they were concealed, it would have been over.

But they didn't. In their haste to get away, they didn't deliver a *coup de grace*, and instead fled. Eumenes was wounded and unconscious, but alive. Later, a woman named Praxo, at whose house the assassins had met, was brought back to Rome, presumably laying the details of the plan, and who was responsible, before the senate.

The final straw came when Perseus reacted to raids from the Thracian king Abrupolis (his specific tribe was the Sapaei), who struck deep into Macedonian territory, as far as Amphipolis, where Alexander the Great had prepared for his Asian expedition, and where his wife and son were exiled after his death. Abrupolis also captured the valuable gold mines at Mount Pangeus, whose loss Perseus couldn't ignore. Perseus marched against Abrupolis, driving him first out of Macedonian territory and finally out of his own kingdom.

Small problem, however: Abrupolis was a Roman ally. This action gave Rome the pretext it needed for war. Under the command of Consul Publius Lucinius Crassus, the legions of Rome finally marched against the phalanx of Macedon. They met in 171 BC at the Thessalian city of Callinicus, near modern day Larissa, and Perseus beat Crassus soundly.

Callinicus is a fairly well documented battle, courtesy of Livy, but it was closer to a skirmish than the kind of decisive engagement we are about to examine at Pydna. Further, it was fought primarily between the cavalry and light troops from both armies. Livy tells us that when the phalanx marched up to turn the battle into a decisive engagement, Perseus was talked down by his advisor, the Cretan Evander. So, while it's significant that Perseus won that particular fight, which was a serious bloody nose for Rome, it can't be considered a true legion versus phalanx battle. According to Livy, the Romans lost 2,000 infantry and 200 cavalry, with another 600 taken prisoner. Perseus' losses were insignificant by comparison, just 40 infantry and 20 cavalry killed.

Perseus was no fool. He knew that a protracted war with Rome did not favor Macedonia. He had been lucky at Callinicus. If he could secure peace now, he would end his war with Rome on a high note, and he would have his gold mines back as well. Perseus asked for a peace treaty with Rome, on the same terms as those his father had agreed after Cynoscephalae. The Romans refused, demanding unconditional surrender. If Perseus threw himself on the mercy of the senate, then, and only then, would he have peace. Perseus refused, and the fighting went on for another three years. While there was plenty of drama, there were no battles that can be called truly decisive.

Until there was.

On June 22, 168 BC, when Aemilius led Rome's army to face Perseus on the foothills of Mount Olocrus, near the village of Katerini, just outside the city of Pydna.

The "Liberators" of Greece Clash – Pre-Battle Maneuvers and First Blood

Aemilius didn't want to be consul, if you believe Plutarch. He'd taken his shot at a second term and lost, and that was that. But his victories over the Lusitani and the Inguani had not been forgotten, and Rome saw in him the commander they needed to bring order to Greece. Overcome by repeated requests to stand for office, he was elected, and immediately given command in the Macedonian War. It's a bit hard to believe, this brave and virtuous commander who was only

reluctantly convinced by public exultation to undertake the highest office in the land. If it had been Polybius writing this, I would have definitely called it bunk, because Polybius was a client of the Aemilii family. But it's Plutarch, who, though he was writing centuries after the fact, has proven to be one of our more reliable sources.

Plutarch also has another story, even harder to swallow than his story that Aemilius only ran for consul reluctantly. After being elected, Aemilius was escorted home by jubilant crowds, only to find his daughter Tertia in tears. When he asked her what was wrong, she flung her arms around his neck, kissed him, and told him that their little dog was dead.

The dog's name, conveniently enough, was Perseus.

Remember now that Aemilius was an augur, a kind of priest who specialized in the interpretation of omens. His interpretation was that it meant good luck for his coming battle, and he certainly had it, as we will see. He would use his status as interpreter of omens again, and to great effect. It's important to remember that the superstitious Romans made major decisions based on the predictions of an oracle, or the pattern of flight of birds, or in the spots they saw on a liver they had cut from a sacrificial animal. A bad omen could crush an army's morale. A good one could give soldiers the will to fight through any reversal. Having a man trusted in the interpretation of omens at their head of the Roman force was, as it is commonly known in modern military circles, a "force multiplier."

Aemilius was handed a sizable force: two overstrength legions, or around 22,000 heavy infantry. Remember that when we speak of a 2nd century Roman legion, we're also talking about the allied legions made up of a wide range of ethno-linguistic groups, from Latins and Etruscans to Samnites, Campanians, Apulians, Italian Greeks, Lucani and Bruttii. If you recognize some of these people as bitter enemies of Rome in past conflicts, that's because they were. The allies would have been armed, armored and formed up much as their Roman counterparts were. To this, we can add around 4,000 cavalry, though Livy (our only real source for specific numbers) doesn't give the breakdown between Roman *equites* and allied horsemen. None of this counts the thousands of light-armed troops, *velites* (javelin-armed skirmishers) from Rome's poorer classes, Numidians, Pergamenes, and allied Greeks who wanted to be out from under the Macedonian yoke. After the defeat at Callinicus, Misagenes, the son of the famous Numidian king Masinissa, who was an important player in the Second Punic War, arrived to throw in his lot with the Romans. He brought with him 1,000 of the prized Numidian light cavalry and 22 war elephants. Masinissa promised another dozen elephants and 1,200 cavalry, though Livy never tells us if they were actually delivered.

Livy also doesn't describe the elephants well enough for us to know what sort they were, but keep in mind the smaller stature of the Atlas elephant, that I have mentioned before.

Whatever variety of elephants Aemilius had, they were part of a large force, diverse and flexible, with a wide selection of different troop types to perform

different roles.

It was still smaller than Perseus' army. The Macedonian king fielded around 44,000 infantry and an equivalent number of cavalry to the Romans. Perseus' army was also diverse, with a core of Macedonian heavy infantry supported by light and auxiliary troops from the mountain tribes of Illyria and Thrace, as well as mercenaries and allies from Greece. A total of 21,000 of these infantry were formed into a single, massive phalanx, a solid wall of metal nearly a mile long. On flat ground, they would be a mobile field of stakes upon which the Roman army would have to throw itself if it hoped to win. This phalanx was vulnerable on the flanks, but Perseus had the cavalry and auxiliary troops to keep them covered, and so long as he picked his ground well, victory seemed assured. He had beaten the Romans at Callinicus, and he could beat them again.

Aemilius inherited an army disheartened from Callinicus and the stalemate that followed. During the 2nd century BC the personal magnetism and patronage of military commanders was one of the most important ingredients in securing troop loyalty and improving morale. The trend of loyalty to a general rather than to the state was already beginning at this time, and it would only get worse over time until the civil war between Marius and Sulla in the 1st century BC heralded the death of the republic, though most historians tie its official death to the beginning of the reign of Gaius Octavian Augustus in 27 BC. Because of this, it was customary for military commanders to attempt to ingratiate themselves to their troops through largesse, lax discipline and flattery.

Not Aemilius. He displayed every bit as much officiousness as when he had first taken command against the Lusitanians as praetor. Plutarch tells us that he accepted command on the condition that he was left alone to do it. If other Romans thought they could command the army better than he could he would step aside and let them, but if they wanted him at the helm they should "*without talking, supply [Aemilius] with means and assistance necessary to the carrying on of the war.*"

In other words, Aemilius wanted them to give him troops, supplies and money, and then shut the hell up and get out of his way.

They did.

Aemilius marched his army south, only to find the king of Macedon drawn up with his army in a highly defensible position. He had encamped at the foot of Mount Olympus, which at nearly 10,000 feet is the highest peak in Greece. The mountain was only passable by narrow defiles, which Perseus had ample time to close up and man with troops. Even better, Perseus had plenty of time to fortify his position, and to ensure that his troops were deployed in a manner that secured their flanks and rear, the part of the phalanx most vulnerable to attack. After extensive maneuvering, the Antigonids were drawn up and dug in on the west bank of the Elpeus river just east of Mount Olympus. Perseus was entrenched and well fortified, and there was easy access to the nearby town of Dium (with all the services a town could provide), as well as plenty of good grazing for the Antigonid horses.

The Romans, meanwhile, had their backs to the Thermaic Gulf, limited room to maneuver and no hope of overwhelming the Antigonid position by a frontal assault.

This didn't bother the Roman soldiers. They were eager to redeem their honor after Callinicus, and to prove to their new taskmaster that they were worthy of his approval. They weren't impressed by Perseus' strong defensive position, and kept pressuring Aemilius to attack immediately. Aemilius told his men to mind their place and to be ready to fight when, where and how he told them to. To underscore the point, and perhaps because he believed that they took the Macedonians too lightly, he ordered the sentinels who pulled night duty to stand guard without their javelins. It was standard practice for lazy soldiers to use their javelins to prop up their shields, and create a brace that would hold them upright while they dozed. Without their javelins, this was now impossible. This was classic Aemilius. Grim-faced disciplinarian to the last.

The two armies sat like that for days, camped so close to each other that fighting could break out at any moment.

Aemilius had two notable attendants with him, at least notable enough for both Plutarch and Livy to lavish description on them, writing them as major characters in the story. The first was his celebrated son, Fabius Maximus, who would go on to fame and glory fighting in Spain. The second was a scion of the famous *gens Cornelia*, Publius Cornelius Scipio Nasica (*nasica* means "pointed nose") Corculum.

When intelligence arrived that the Petra pass over the mountains was unguarded, and would allow Aemilius to approach Perseus from his rear, Aemilius assigned Nasica a small force of 3,000 allied Italian infantry, 5,000 Roman legionaries and 120 cavalry as well as another 200 mixed allied light troops, Thracians and Cretans, most likely armed as javelineers and archers respectively. Nasica had orders to march to the sea, to make it look like he intended to take ships from there, and thus land in Perseus' rear. Then, under cover of darkness, the army was to make a forced march through the unguarded pass and take Perseus by surprise.

It probably would have worked, except that one of the Cretan archers serving as an auxiliary in the Roman army deserted, fled to the Macedonian camp, and raised the alarm.

Perseus immediately sent one of his commanders, a man named Milo, with 2,000 Macedonian troops and another 10,000 mercenaries (their nationality isn't specified, but it is likely they were Thracians) to close the pass. What came next was first blood between the two armies, though the fight isn't considered part of the actual Battle of Pydna.

Accounts of the fighting are confused, with Polybius telling us that Milo's troops secured the pass and then fell asleep on watch, easy prey to Nasica and his troops. But Nasica's own account tells a different story, one that is far more dramatic, and therefore, in the absence of additional data, the one I like better.

Keep in mind that Mount Olympus is gigantic. It's craggy and ancient. You

can picture the dark and treacherous defiles, the Romans tightly packed as they crept through, trying and failing to keep their clattering weapons and armor from making noise. You can imagine the Romans, moving cautiously but confidently, convinced that they were about to move through an unguarded pass, only to have the darkness splinter apart into the shapes of thousands of armored men, blocking the way forward.

Rather than flee, Nasica charged.

He claims he came toe to toe with a Thracian mercenary, and took him down with a javelin. It isn't clear whether he threw it or thrust it like a spear. You could do both with a *pilum*. This was no small feat. The Thracians had a terrifying warrior-bandit culture. The 1st century AD Roman poet Valerius Flaccus told a story that one tribe of Thracians drove the Egyptian Pharaoh Sesostris back to Thebes after slaughtering so many of his innocent people that he lost the will to fight. Perseus already had 3,000 Thracians in his army, and another 2,000 who joined under Kotys, king of the Odysai. Livy describes them as fighting like "*wild beasts who had been too long kept caged*." The Thracian whom Nasica killed might have been armed with a *rhomphaia*, a scythe-like weapon that was half-sword, half-polearm. He might also have carried javelins of his own.

There was brutal fighting in the tight confines of the pass, but the Romans, surprised or not, won out, and the Macedonians and their mercenaries ran for their lives. Milo stripped off his armor to lighten his load and enable him to run faster, a universal sign of cowardice and shame in the ancient world.

The Romans held the pass, but the fleeing Macedonians brought word to Perseus, who realized that his position was untenable if the Romans had a way over the mountain and into his backfield. He immediately ordered his camp uprooted and marched his army away from the mountain.

It was a critical decision point for Perseus. He could have refused battle, dispersed his army, and lived to fight again on ground of his choosing, but he stayed and fought. Why he made this choice is lost to history. Plutarch tells us that his advisors counseled him to make a stand. He had the home turf advantage, with many of his troops fighting to defend their homes and families against a foreign aggressor. He also had the advantage of numbers, which would give his battle line the longer frontage it would need to envelop the Romans and turn inward against their flanks. Further, a refusal to stand and fight would eventually erode the morale of his troops, especially when they were fighting in their own land.

But while it's impossible to be certain, I believe the reason Perseus chose to stand and fight was the ground. The plain outside Pydna is fertile but also coastal, and occasional flooding with an influx of water from the Thermaic Gulf kept the ground smooth and flat. Broken only by two small rivers, it was ideal for the phalanx, providing them with the perfect surface on which to march, maneuver and fight without any real danger of losing the critical tight formation on which everyone's safety depended. And with Pydna on his left and the ocean beyond, it would be easy to keep his massive force supplied.

I visited and walked the battlefield at Pydna, including the original position of the Antigonid line, and the ground confirms my theory. Unlike Cynoscephalae, it is not steep. It isn't perfectly flat either, but rather consists of low, rolling hills that obscure line of sight, but would not provide much of a challenge to a phalanx trying to keep cohesion.

Aemilius, through the mountain passes, moved into the foothills around Mount Olocrus, and Perseus drew up on the plain below to meet him, behind a river, and at the top of a low ridge that gave him a slight high-ground advantage. Aemilius was no fool. He knew the ground ahead favored the phalanx, and the broken terrain of the foothills favored his own legions. A stalemate resulted, with both commanders refusing to move and trying to tempt the other onto the ground that favored their own formation. Aemilius wanted Perseus to come up into the foothills, and Perseus wanted Aemilius to come down and meet him on the plain.

Aemilius' officers were every bit as impatient as they were back at the mountain. Nasica was particularly chomping at the bit, following his defeat of Milo's troops on top of Mount Olympus. He joined the other officers in clamoring for an immediate attack, no matter that the terrain favored Perseus' phalanx.

Aemilius smiled. "When I was your age, I might have done just that. But many victories have taught me how to win. They've also taught me never to pit soldiers exhausted from a long march against a phalanx in such a good position." (I'm paraphrasing from Plutarch here). It was a classic old bull/young bull scenario, and Nasica reluctantly accepted his commander's decision. The Roman army settled in to wait.

They made good use of the time, throwing up the kind of fortified camp that had helped secure the victory at Beneventum. On the battlefield at Pydna, the position where the Roman line was likely located is the site of a few houses with evidence of agricultural development. It's possible that the remains of the Roman camp have long since been obliterated to make room for foundations and fields. Nasica's victory on the mountain ensured that Roman morale remained high despite Aemilius' restraining their impatience to attack.

And then nature intervened.

Remember again how superstitious ancient people were, and the Romans in particular. Omens and portents could change the course of a battle in an instant, if they were interpreted to be unfavorable to one side or the other. That night, the moon, full and high, suddenly began to grow dark, its whiteness shifting to dull red, as if it were washed by blood. You can picture the frightened pointing and whispering from both camps on nights when such a phenomenon occurred, with everyone from the *primus pilus* (the legion's senior centurion) to the lowest ranking foot soldier giving their own armchair interpretation of how this signified the favor or disfavor of the gods.

Modern readers will recognize what I'm describing: a lunar eclipse. These are rather common occurrences, happening anywhere from two to five times a year.

Unlike solar eclipses, they're visible from anywhere in the world, as this one was to the Romans, staring up from the foothills of Mount Olocrus.

But the Romans had a critical advantage. Livy tells the story best:

C. Sulpicius Gallus, a military tribune attached to the Second Legion, who had been a praetor the year before, obtained the consul's permission to call the soldiers on parade. He then explained that on the following night the moon would lose her light from the second hour to the fourth, and no one must regard this as a portent, because this happened in the natural order of things at stated intervals, and could be known beforehand and predicted. Just in the same way, then, as they did not regard the regular rising and setting of the sun and moon or the changes in the light of the moon from full circle to a thin and waning crescent as a marvel, so they ought not to take its obscuration when it is hidden in the shadow of the earth for a supernatural portent. On the next night, the eclipse took place at the stated hour, and the Roman soldiers thought that Gallus possessed almost divine wisdom. It gave a shock to the Macedonians as portending the fall of their kingdom and the ruin of their nation, nor could their soothsayers give any other explanation. Shouts and howls went on in the Macedonian camp until the moon emerged and gave her light.

Gallus knew astronomy, and more importantly, he understood the impact of the power of superstition on the morale of the army. I like Livy's description and am happy to give credit to Gallus here, but want to note that other sources credit Paullus himself for the decision to parade and inform the troops. As a tribune, Gallus certainly wouldn't have had the authority to parade the entire army himself. Either way, the Roman handling of the eclipse clearly gave their army a moral advantage over the Antigonids, who were taken completely by surprise.

And here again, Aemilius' experience as an augur helped. He knew his men would see the eclipse as a portent. He knew that if he didn't seize control of the situation, he risked losing his army's morale, and its will to fight. His skill at augury and his reputation as a divine served him well. He reacted quickly as soon as the eclipse was over, sacrificing 11 heifers to Luna. The next morning, he sacrificed another 20 to Herakles (known as Hercules to the Romans). He then took an oath to provide both a hecatomb (a sacrifice of 100 cattle) and to host games to honor Herakles. That he chose to sacrifice in the Greek tradition and to a Greek god might have been directed at shoring up the nerve of his Greek allies and auxiliaries, playing to the idea that Greek gods might favor him in Greek lands. In any case, the move worked, and we hear no more of wavering morale based on the events of the evening. The waiting resumed, neither army willing to give up the ground that best suited their troops.

The Misbehaving Mule – The Battle of Pydna Gets Underway

After the dramatic battle in the Petra pass, after the tense maneuvering for position, after the scare of the lunar eclipse, both armies were still encamped across from one another, neither willing to make the first move. The tinder was dried and laid in. All that was needed was a spark to kick it off.

The spark came in the form of a mule.

The name of the mule is lost to history, but it was a pack animal detailed to

one of Aemilius' watering parties. June in that part of Greece is brutally hot, and both armies were sweating profusely under their heavy armor. A small train of mules was led by a group of Roman soldiers down to a stream below the foothills to fill up jugs of water for the thirsty troops back at camp. This was a typical activity, and hardly the type of maneuver that the enemy would pay attention to.

Except this time.

As the watering party neared the stream, the mules got the scent of the water. Mules are known for being stubborn, but the truth is that any livestock will become unruly if it's thirsty enough and smells water. Ask any modern day cowboy who's tried to herd cattle making a dash for a nearby stream. One of the mules, particularly parched, scented the water, tore free of its handlers, and raced off, the Romans shouting and running after it.

Four legs are faster than two, and the mule got a good head start. You can imagine that the Romans lost sight of it, but knew it was heading toward the stream. They put on speed, grumbling, and at last stumbled over a rise to see their mule up to its hocks in the water. But it wasn't drinking.

The Romans froze.

Standing midway in the stream, their hands wrapped tightly around the mule's halter, was a group of Thracians, Perseus' troops, pulling the animal up onto their side of the water.

It's the kind of thing that's easy to second guess. A decent mule wasn't cheap, but was hardly expensive enough to risk the possibility of a general engagement without command authorization. The smart thing would be to let the Thracians have the mule, report back to the army and see what Aemilius wanted to do about it (most likely, nothing).

But Romans were prickly where honor was concerned, and despite Nasica's encounter with the Thracians in the mountain pass, they didn't think much of the combat abilities of Greeks and their ilk. What's more, it was hot, and they were likely surly from having to do the difficult and tedious work of drawing water, and they had been chomping at the bit to fight for days now.

They weren't giving up that mule.

A brawl ensued, with runners on both sides racing off to get help. We never find out what happened to the mule. I assume it ran off.

The Romans dispatched a unit of 700 Ligurians, Italian allies of the same ilk that Aemilius had fought against in his first consular command, to help. It looked more like a gang fight than anything else, but the truth was that the famous Battle of Pydna had in fact begun. Because Perseus, who was no fool, saw the opportunity he'd been waiting for: a chance to draw the Romans down out of the rocky foothills of the Olocrus and onto the flat plain where his phalanx had the advantage.

He immediately ordered his entire army to advance on the brawl, as rapidly as possible, without even giving them the chance to form into ranks.

Up on the rocky high ground, with a good view of the whole battlefield, Aemilius must have been shocked as he watched the gates of Perseus' camp swing

wide and the entire Macedonian army come racing out. Likewise, the Ligurians must have been terrified. They had come out to help out in a lopsided brawl over a mule, and found themselves facing the entire might of the Macedonian army.

Nasica, who by this time had ridden out to the stream, reined in as he saw the forward elements of Perseus' army nearly upon him. More Thracians, whom he'd learned to fear after his fight in the mountain pass, but also lightly armed mercenaries, some of whom were Paeonians. As the Thracians and mercenary light troops spread out, Nasica could see the ranks of Perseus' Macedonian phalangites behind them, their bronze armor gleaming over their tunics. They likely held their 21-foot pikes with the points straight up, looking for all the world like a moving forest with a steel canopy. Behind these came Perseus' corps of Bronze Shields.

Word quickly spread through the Roman camp of what was unfolding on the plain below. The Romans had been itching for a fight for days now, and once again the cry went up to satisfy honor and trounce the enemy. Perseus' light troops engaged the Roman skirmishers and their supporting Ligurians, and the Romans were being driven back now, wavering. Without assistance, they would soon be overwhelmed, leaving the Macedonians in possession of the field (and, presumably, the mule that started it all). The Roman troops were furious, and demanded to be allowed to march out and engage the enemy.

Aemilius realized that he had held his men back as long as he could, and that he risked real dissent in the ranks if he tried to prevent the army from going to the aid of their comrades. He knew full well that to leave the foothills and face the phalanx on the plain played to Perseus' advantage, but he saw no choice.

Aemilius gave the order to form up and take the legions out to fight.

Mounting his horse, Aemilius deliberately left his helmet and cuirass behind, riding back and forth among his troops, shouting encouragement, and letting all see that their commander was so certain of the enemy's weakness that he couldn't be bothered to put on armor.

The moments that followed must have tried Aemilius' patience to its very limit. Perseus had raced out of his camp, rushing his men at top speed in the hope of getting into position first and enveloping the Roman light troops fighting over the stream. Aemilius was willing to gratify his men's wishes and march out to fight, but he wasn't willing to do it without his troops being properly formed up. There was nothing he could do but helplessly watch the fighting unfold out on the plain while his legionaries scrambled to strap on their kit, grab their weapons and muster into their formations. He waited as long as he could, but at last the phalanx had reached his troops by the stream, and Aemilius could wait no longer. He gave the order to step off, even as some of his soldiers scrambled to find their units.

The formation that marched from the foothills was not ideal. It's impossible to know the exact lineup, but we can guess that he had his Roman legionaries in the center, and we know from Livy that he formed a right flank from allied Italian troops and cavalry, behind a screen of the Numidian elephants we discussed

earlier. The cavalry's horses would have been skittish and tense, terrified by the smell of the elephants, and their riders must have been hard pressed to keep them under control. Aemilius took personal command of one of the legions, which was positioned opposite the Bronze Shield phalangites. His second legion, to his left, faced another corps of phalangites, the White Shields. That Aemilius took personal command of the legion facing the Bronze Shields, and let a subordinate command the legion facing the White Shields gives further evidence to the assertion that the White Shields were an inferior corps.

The Roman light troops down by the stream probably didn't notice that the entire Roman army was coming to their aid. They had other things to worry about. Forming up on the left side of Perseus' line was his *agēma*, 3,000 picked warriors of the king's own infantry guard. If they could turn the fight at the stream around, they would expose Perseus' left, and give the Romans a much better chance at Perseus' best.

But the Roman light troops were barely armored, most having a helmet, if that, and only a small, thin buckler. Their primary job was skirmishing at a distance, pelting their enemy with javelins, sling stones and arrows. Now, they found themselves engaged in a stand-up fight with a heavily armed and armored enemy, whose spears punched through their flimsy shields and armor, mowing them down like wheat before the scythe.

At that instant, a shout went up from the Macedonian ranks, and as one man, the phalanx lowered their pikes, the front five ranks to 90 degrees, the ranks behind to 45 degrees. The forest of death had now become a hedgerow, the shining points of the pikes leveled at the Roman line. At the same moment, they swung their shields off their shoulders and onto their arms, making the line as impenetrable as it was deadly.

The Roman light troops would have broken and run at that moment, save for an act of reckless heroism. Two of the Italian allied tribes fighting at the stream were the Marrucinians and the Pelignians. The two tribes were closely linked, having been allies when they fought against Rome during the Second Samnite War. When that war was lost, they became allies of their Roman conquerors, but would not enjoy full Roman citizenship until after the Social War almost a century later. Plutarch tells us that the commander of the Pelignians, a man named Salvius, saw that all was lost, and that his troops could not stand against the Macedonian advance. His men were wavering, and they needed something drastic to galvanize them if they were to stay in the fight.

Salvius turned to his standard bearer, snatched the emblem away from him, and threw it into the phalanx.

To a modern soldier, a flag may be a point of pride, a locus of dignity, but everyone knows the axiom of the modern warrior: it's not the flag you lay down your life for, it's the person fighting beside you.

But to an ancient Roman, the standard was the repository of the unit's honor. To have the standard sullied was the greatest insult a military unit could sustain, and any price, even death, was to be paid to recover it. Later legends underscore

this point. When Julius Caesar tried to land at Dubris in 55 BC, his troops were said to be reluctant to debark the ships into the water under heavy fire from the Britons assembled to resist him. Ashamed of their cowardice, the *aquilifer* (the standard-bearer who carried the legion's eagle) of the 10th Legion jumped in first and waded ahead, shouting: "Jump in, boys! Unless you want me to hand this eagle to the enemy. I, for one, intend to do my duty." Put to shame by this heroic act, and desperate to protect their legionary standard, the soldiers left the boats and got in the fight.

The legionary eagle standard of the type described in that story wasn't officially adopted by the legions until the second consulship of the famous military reformer Gaius Marius, nearly 65 years after Pydna, but the fervor surrounding the military standard was much the same at the time.

Seeing their standard in the hands of the enemy, the Romans hurled themselves at the phalangites, without regard for their safety, desperate to recover their honor. They chopped at the pikes with their swords, they sprang up and tried to leap over them. Some of them threw themselves on the points, trying to crawl up the shafts to throttle their wielders. Others tried to get past the points and seize the shafts, wrestling them out of grip of the Macedonians. They bit and clawed, punched and kicked, stabbed with swords and daggers and javelins. The water ran red, and the Roman dead began to pile up. The front ranks went down and went down hard, the men behind them saw the futility of pressing the attack, no matter what honor was at stake. They were out of all formation, without the equipment to match the perfect order and heavy weapons and armor arrayed against them.

At last the rage washed away, fear took its place, and they gave into it, breaking and running, leaving the Macedonians in possession of the ground.

A reasonable person would forgive the Roman allied troops for fleeing. They were outnumbered, out-armed and out-armored. Some were skirmishers in close combat with heavy troops. They didn't stand a chance.

But Aemilius wasn't reasonable by our standards. As far as he was concerned, he had abandoned the critical high ground, the rocky terrain that favored his troops over Perseus' phalanx. He had sacrificed this advantage to save these men, and now they were running away. He was so furious that he ripped his own clothing in frustration.

Perseus' phalanx, meanwhile, pressed closer. It was a terrifying sight. Their bronze helmets and greaves flashed in the hot sun. The rank and file phalangites wore the linen cuirass, but their officers probably wore bronze cuirasses, often embossed in the shape of a muscled torso. Here and there along the battle line, Aemilius could see bright glints of white where bronze shields and greaves had been overlaid with silver or tin. The entire unit moved as a single man, presenting a solid line of spearheads, so tightly packed together that you could barely see the warriors behind them.

The *velites* and allied skirmishers ran in loose order in front of the packed legionary infantry, a cloud of hornets buzzing in the rapidly shrinking space

between the legion and the phalanx. They threw their javelins, shot their bows and slung their stones. Some found their marks, piercing bronze or finding uncovered flesh, but no sooner did a Macedonian phalangite fall, than the officers shouted orders and the *lochoi* closed up, leaving the tight formation whole and unbroken. Most of the missiles clattered off the tightly packed shafts of the pikes, or bounced off the thick bronze helmets, shields and greaves. The phalanx rolled on, not even slowing.

Aemilius realized the danger. The phalanx was still out on the flat surface of the plain, enabling it to keep its tight formation. Despite the shouts of their centurions, his own legionaries were slowing their advance, balking at the sheer vastness of the phalanx. They had just witnessed their light troops slaughtered and running for their lives, and their morale was shaken. The Macedonian pike was more than ten times the length of the Roman sword. If the legion came to close quarters with the phalanx, the men would be run through by the pikes long before they got in sword range. Aemilius had to do something, and fast.

Walking backwards may not seem like a big deal, and it isn't for one person or even ten people. But try getting thousands of men, all frightened, all packed together, all committed and determined to moving forward to suddenly stop and back up. Add to this the chaos and noise of battle. Many Roman helmets left the ears clear, but some Roman soldiers and auxiliaries would have been wearing hoods or animal skins that covered their ears. And even if that complication was removed, this was an age before loudspeakers or amplifiers. The Roman army would have had to signal via trumpet blasts, echoed by the verbal commands of the centurions and sometimes blows from their vine rods. And all of this must be accomplished while maintaining unit cohesion. Rank and file must maintain line cohesion and the unit must hang together. To have gaps appear in the line was death for the ancient warrior, as these holes could be exploited by the enemy to attack from the unprotected sides, or to sow chaos and confusion. Aemilius must have been aware of the risk he was taking when he called for the legions to withdraw, directing them to back up the hill and cede the flat ground to the phalanx. He hoped that the phalanx would follow, and that the legions could draw them up into the broken terrain of Mount Olocrus. It could have ended very badly. If the legions had lost cohesion in attempting to execute this maneuver, the phalanx could have seized its opportunity to charge forward, and all would have been lost.

It is a testament to the motivation and discipline of the Romans that they pulled the maneuver off, withdrawing in good order, hanging together despite the terror, the heat and the sight of the phalanx bearing down on them.

Having bought himself some breathing room, Aemilius signaled his right wing forward. The backpedaling legions would have heard a thundering off to their right, as if the ground itself shook. Those in the center of their units wouldn't have even bothered to look. All they'd have seen was the helmets of the men beside them. But the troopers on the far right raised a cheer as the corps of war elephants charged past.

Even if these were only the smaller Atlas elephants, they would have been an impressive sight, over 2 tons each, 8 feet high at the shoulder, possibly armored, and possibly carrying towers on their backs, or soldiers armed with bows, spears or javelins. They would have roared and trumpeted as they ran, agitated by their handlers, pounding toward the enemy. Behind them came the Roman and allied cavalry, ready to sweep in and run down the fleeing enemy once the elephants sent them packing.

And that they did. The Thracian and mercenary troops that had initially started the scrap over the mule took the full brunt of the assault. A common tactic against elephants in the ancient world was to pepper them with javelins, sling stones and arrows in the hopes of driving them mad with pain, and into a rampage against the tightly packed troops of their own side.

But the Thracians and mercenaries were exhausted and scattered by the fight with the Roman light troops, and they didn't get enough shots off in time. The elephants crashed into them, trampling them into the mud, tossing them in the air and goring them with their tusks. There were, at most, 34 elephants, which didn't cover a lot of frontage, and left plenty of room for the Roman and allied cavalry to stream around them and to run down the fleeing Thracians and mercenaries. The 3,000 men of the *agēma* were badly exposed, and their officers had to be scrambling to figure out what to do. They couldn't peel off from the phalanx and leave Perseus' left wide open, but neither could they march straight ahead and ignore their own open left.

And the Macedonian left *was* wide open. Worse, a Roman unit of elephants and cavalry was now positioned off the phalanx's left. For now, it was hotly engaged in pursuit of the fleeing Thracians and mercenaries, but if the officers could get their men under control, they would turn them into the flank of the main phalanx, which would be an utter disaster for Perseus.

As the line of legionaries backed up into the foothills of Mount Olocrus, the ground became steadily rougher. The phalanx had the bit in their teeth now, seeing the enemy at such close quarters, nearly in range of the deadly, densely packed pikes. They advanced into the rough terrain, marching uphill to meet the enemy. It was a fateful move, and one that cost them.

Two things now happened.

First, with Thracians and mercenary troops driven off, the Roman line now overlapped the phalanx on Perseus' left. With agility and precision, the rightmost portion of the legion swung inward, driving into the phalanx's left flank.

Secondly, the rough ground, the exhaustion, the missile fire and the sheer difficulty of keeping 21,000 men marching in step began to take its toll. Men stumbled, drifted apart, paused for breath.

All along the phalanx, gaps began to appear.

Aemilius saw his chance. He rode frantically up and down the line, shouting at his men to attack. In all likelihood, they couldn't hear him and it didn't matter. There was no soldier so deadly, so tactically attuned as the veteran Roman centurion. These hardened warriors would have known exactly what to do, even

without hearing the orders. They led their men forward into the gaps in the phalanx.

The Macedonians would have tried to cover, pointing their pikes left and right. They would have met with some success, piercing shields, bronze helmets, bone and flesh. Many Romans would never have got close enough to use their deadly short swords to any effect.

But a few did. They put their heads down and charged. They passed the deadly pike heads, and beyond them, the pike was just a wooden pole, of no threat to anyone. The Romans were now inside the phalanx, in their sweet spot, almost close enough to the enemy to smell his breath. In close, the Roman soldier could thrust with his sword, slicing easily through the linen cuirass, expertly finding the unprotected flesh of the armpit where it overlapped the bronze. One by one, the phalangites began to fall.

Desperate, faced with deadly enemies close enough to kiss, the phalangites took the only course of action open to them.

They dropped their pikes.

Remember, every Macedonian phalangite was armed with a backup weapon, usually the *kopis*, a heavy, one-handed sword with a single-edged, forward-curving blade, much like the modern cavalry saber. Some may have been armed with the straight-bladed, leaf-shaped *xiphos* sword. These side arms were intended as weapons of last resort, to be used only once the phalanx had lost the ability to wield its deadly pikes.

Make no mistake, the phalanx was a pike formation. The phalangites knew how to wield swords, but it was not their strong suit. The old hoplite *aspis* was big, covering nearly the whole body. But these phalangites were using smaller, lighter shields, designed to be slung on the shoulder to leave both hands free to hold the pike. They were roughly 2 feet in diameter, barely the size of a modern manhole cover. Together in a formed line, they could reliably provide coverage against most blows. Individually, they were, to put it mildly, unforgiving.

By contrast, the Roman soldiers carried the massive *scutum*, an oval-shaped 2½ by 4-foot, 20-pound monster, equipped with a metal center boss that both protected the hand and turned the shield into a metal boxing glove. The Romans were trained to the sword – it was their primary weapon, so drilled into them that they wielded it like an appendage of their bodies.

As the phalanx fragmented, laying down their pikes and drawing their swords, the battle at the center turned into a knife-fight, and one that the Romans excelled at. The Romans cut and thrust with their swords and punched with their shields. The Macedonians gave as good an account of themselves as they could, but within moments, the unit came apart, and they were dying in droves.

Higher up on the hill Aemilius saw something that must have made his legs weak with relief.

The back of the Antigonid phalanx was lengthening, stretching, the dots of men turning into long lines streaming back to Perseus' camp.

The first runners, knowing they had lost, were getting a head start on the rout.

Before long, the stream became a flood as the Antigonid officers were either killed, or lost control of their men. Panic seized the phalanx and more and more Antigonids threw down their shields and ran for their lives.

The final blow was delivered by the elephants and cavalry, who had been finally drawn into some semblance of order after having run off the Thracian and mercenary light troops. They wheeled and charged again, this time into the main phalanx's rear.

It was over. Attacked at close quarters from all sides, panicked and beset, the phalanx shattered. Every man fought for himself now, on ground better suited to Roman arms, against enemies fighting in the manner they preferred. Within moments, the entire Macedonian army was in flight, including Perseus himself. Surrounded by his royal cavalry, the king galloped off, leaving his army to fend for itself.

Only the *agēma* stood firm, not far from the stream where the fighting had started. Of all the Antigonids, they alone refused to run, and died where they stood, fighting to the last man.

The mighty phalanx, one of the greatest ever assembled, had been beaten. The legion was triumphant and the legacy of Alexander the Great shattered forever.

Aftermath

Pydna was an utter rout for the Antigonids, and a glorious victory for the Romans. By the time the dust had cleared, 20,000 Antigonids, nearly half the army, were killed, most stabbed in the back as they ran from the Romans. Another 11,000 were captured, including Perseus himself.

Plutarch tells us that the king's cowardice was total. Intercepted by Antigonid reserves as they fled, who cursed the king's cavalry as cowards, Perseus took off his purple robes (the color of royalty), hid his crown and dismounted, leading his horse like a common cavalryman. One by one, his guard fell away from him, pausing to tie bootlaces, or riding off to scout and never coming back. They were more frightened of Perseus' cruelty and blame-shifting than they were of being captured by the Romans.

They were right to be afraid. When Perseus arrived at the Macedonian capital of Pella, he murdered two of his treasurers, Euctus and Eudaeus, who had dared to criticize and advise him regarding the defeat. The murders caused the rest of his court to scatter, until he had only three companions left, Evander the Cretan, an Aetolian named Archedemus and a Boeotian named Neon. The only troops who remained loyal were his Cretan mercenaries, and these only because he continued to pay them. When the money ran out, as it did shortly afterward, so did they.

Perseus finally took refuge in the temple of Castor and Pollux in Samothrace, a Greek island in the northern part of the Aegean Sea. A Roman fleet cordoned off the island, trapping the king, who arranged escape with a Cretan pirate named Oroandes. Oroandes took the king's treasure aboard, then told him to meet him

on the docks with his family after nightfall. In a development that should surprise absolutely no one, Oroandes sailed off with the treasure, and Perseus showed up after sunset to find himself abandoned, penniless and surrounded by the enemy.

Taken by the Romans, Perseus' reaction was, to put it mildly, undignified. In a time when warrior kings were expected to prefer death to dishonor, he blubbered and wept and begged for mercy. Aemilius was disgusted and embarrassed by the sight, and said "Why are you crying? You're not here in chains randomly. You brought this on yourself. Stop your sniveling. You're cheapening the glory of my victory crying like a little girl. It's beneath a Roman to fight a coward like you."

The encounter affected Aemilius deeply, and he was despondent after Perseus was taken from his sight. When his junior officers asked him why he was so upset, he mused about the fickle nature of fortune, and how a man so glorious and exalted could be laid so low. Here I quote directly from Plutarch, as he describes Aemilius speaking to his officers:

... can you, I say, believe there is any certainty in what we now possess, whilst there is such a thing as chance? No, young men, cast off that vain pride and empty boast of victory; sit down with humility, looking always for what is yet to come, and the possible future reverses which the divine displeasure may eventually make the end of our present happiness.

It is the perfect ending to a story, the kind of denouement we've come to expect from the best fiction. Aemilius, at the height of his glory, found himself reminded of his humanity, and the weakness of the human position in the world. He was changed, and for the better.

Designated Macedonicus, he was voted a triumph by the senate, and processed through Rome in state, to the cheers of an adoring crowd. The treasures of Macedon and the victorious soldiers marched behind him, and finally Perseus, still weeping, in chains.



X

LEGIONS AND PHALANXES

The military system of a nation is not an independent section of the social system but an aspect of its totality.

Tony Judt, *Reappraisals*

Pydna, of course, was not the end. The Roman legion would go on to fight more variations of the phalanx in the centuries to come, taking on the other armies influenced by the Hellenistic phalanx and employing, to varying degrees, similar methods. There was a Fourth Macedonian War, followed by a war against the Achaeans, and the kingdoms of Numidia and Pontus, in north Africa and north Turkey, respectively. But the writing was already on the wall. The phalanx had met the legion on multiple occasions, in all variations of leadership, terrain, weather, states of troop discipline and supply, and the various morale-influencing factors of divine inspiration and omen. The legion was the hands-down winner, and would continue to dominate the battlefield for hundreds of years to come.

But we already knew this. Again, the interesting question is, “why?” I hope that the preceding chapters have helped to answer this question in your own minds, but let’s take some time to go over the evidence, and more importantly, to return to Polybius’ original statement as to why the legion won out over the phalanx, which I presented at the very start of the book in chapter I: agility, flexibility and adaptability. So, was Polybius right?

Was Polybius Right?

The answer, supported by the evidence of the six battles we’ve just examined, is “yes, but only partly.”

Let’s take a look. Polybius is certainly correct in that while both the legion and the phalanx required tight unit cohesion, and were limited by the fundamentals of the battle line, the legion certainly required less of it. The short sword is, by its very nature, a weapon well suited to *both* whole unit combat and individual fighting. Legionaries deployed at larger intervals, which gave them more space to maneuver as individuals, able to absorb the shock of a charge, to dodge incoming missiles, to fence with an opponent if required. More importantly, they were *trained* to do this very thing. The sword was their weapon, and they were skilled

in employing it both as an instrument of a formed maniple, and as an individual fencer.

Contrast this with the phalangite, whose primary weapon, the massive pike, was *only* effective when formed. Fighting as an individual, a phalangite was left with little option but to drop the giant weapon and draw his own sword, with which he was not nearly as well trained as his Roman enemy.

There's a great example of the ineffectiveness of the phalangite pike in an individual duel in Diodorus. He tells a story of a fight that breaks out in the camp of the army of Alexander the Great at Alexandria – not Alexandria, Egypt, but a different city named for him in modern day Uch, Pakistan. Coragus, one of Alexander's Macedonian phalangites, had a bit too much to drink and got into it with Dioxippus, one of the Athenian allied soldiers in Alexander's army.

Both men were, by all accounts, tough as nails. Coragus was a veteran of many battles, and had secured a solid reputation as a fighter. Dioxippus had won the boxing title in the Olympics of 336 BC. It's not clear if Dioxippus had won at ancient boxing, which was mostly similar to the modern sport, or at *pankration* (all-force), a kind of mixed martial art that combined throws, holds, punches, kicks and whatever else you could think of, apart from biting and eye-gouging. Either way, Dioxippus was nobody to take lightly, but that didn't scare Coragus, who wound up challenging him to a duel. The whole thing turned into a kind of contest between the Macedonians and the Greeks, with each side cheering on their respective champion.

Everybody cleared a space for them to fight, and Coragus put on his armor. Dioxippus showed up naked and oiled. Coragus appears to have brought his pike and a javelin, while Dioxippus brought only a club. Now, we don't know how long this club was, but it makes more sense to me if it was a short, one-handed weapon, not all that different from the Roman sword. You should keep in mind that the club was the favored weapon of the mythical hero Herakles, which lent a symbolic flair to Dioxippus' choice.

The fight began, and Dioxippus easily dodged Coragus' thrown javelin. Diodorus alternately calls Coragus' weapon a "spear" and later a "long lance," which likely means he's talking about the pike. Whatever the weapon, Diodorus is clear that Dioxippus got inside the weapon's effective range, slammed the pike shaft with his club, and snapped it.

Coragus doesn't appear to have had time to reverse the weapon to make use of his butt-spike, so he drew his sword, but Dioxippus was already close enough to grab his wrist and execute a wrestling throw, evidence that Dioxippus had won at *pankration* and not boxing, to put Coragus on his back. Then, boot on his opponent's neck, Dioxippus raised his club and proclaimed victory.

It was a great moment for Dioxippus, but it ultimately led to his downfall. The Macedonians were furious at the embarrassing loss, falsely accused him of theft and the poor Athenian wound up committing suicide in protest. He was largely ridiculed for this overreaction, but Alexander was furious at the senseless waste of a powerful life.

Now, Dioxippus was not a Roman legionary, but the story does illustrate the effectiveness of a fast-moving individual armed with a short weapon against a Hellenistic phalangite who is without the protection of his formed phalanx. It is possible that the Roman legionary had some speed advantage. The average phalangite wore the linen or bronze cuirass, helmet, shield and greaves and carried the pike. The *hastati* front line of the Romans would only have worn a much lighter pectoral, and possibly a single greave. The Roman shield was much heavier, but the lighter armor, in the front line at least, may have given the *hastati* a speed edge in engaging the phalanx.

Even more importantly, the Romans introduced a tactical innovation, in that they combined the missile functions of the skirmisher with the shock combat function of the heavy infantry. The Roman legionary, possibly with the exception of the *triarii*, had a limited missile weapon role – it was most often used to soften up the enemy line, but also could be used to return missile fire from skirmishers in a pinch. The *pilum* was purpose-built in a way that most ancient javelins were not – uniquely designed to cause an enemy to discard his shield, thus preparing the battleground to allow the legionary the chance to engage in close combat under the most advantageous circumstances possible.

Roman legionaries did not skirmish as the *velites* did, but their hybrid role as a limited kind of missile troop is often underappreciated. The argument can be made that this is because it wasn't new. The famous Persian "Immortals" of Xerxes I, who fought Leonidas and his Spartans at Thermopylae, are described by Herodotus and depicted in carvings at Persepolis – modern day Marvdasht in Iran – as being spear- and shield-armed heavy infantry who *also* carried bows. But the general belief is that the Immortals acted either as formed groups of either archers *or* spearmen, and didn't combine the two as the Roman legionary did, using their missiles to soften up the enemy just before the charge to close combat, a similar tactic to the 17th century cavalry cuirassier, who discharged his pistol at point-blank range just before his charge hit home.

The effectiveness of this combining of skirmishing and shock-combat capabilities in a single infantry class is illustrated by the abolition of the *velites* during the Marian reforms of 107 BC, after which the legions had no dedicated skirmishing body (though auxiliaries still skirmished). Each legionary had their javelins, and that was that.

Polybius is certainly right that terrain played an important role. Looking at the tactical subunits of the Hellenistic phalanx and their respective depth and frontage gives us some clues. The Hellenistic *lochos* of 16 men would have been useless, just a long line of 16 men in single file, and even the *tetrarchia* of 64 would still have only had a frontage of four men, or 16 feet, and would therefore be easily enveloped. At the *speira* level of 256 men, you're covering a little less than 50 feet, which still isn't great. It isn't until you get up to the *chiliarchia* level of 1,024 men that you're getting to just under 200 feet of frontage. And all of this assumes that the phalanx is deploying in the usual *lochoi* of 16 soldiers. In many instances, as at Cynoscephalae, the phalanx's depth was doubled, with the

resulting loss of 50 percent of its frontage.

Now, compare this with the Roman legion. We're not sure of the exact depth of the maniple (the sources point to either three or six ranks deep) but we are still looking at units of approximately 120 soldiers. If we assume they're three ranks deep, and we believe Polybius' statement that the soldiers have 6 feet each, we're looking at almost 250 feet of frontage for a single maniple. And this doesn't even count the likelihood that the two centuries were able to function independently of one another (after all, each had its own centurion), which would result in two tactical units covering over 100 feet of frontage each. The checkerboard deployment of these units would have allowed them to operate independently of each other without having to worry too much about their flanks. If one maniple or century was attacked on their exposed flank, there would be another one not far off who could come to their aid. And any unit that hit a Roman flank would in turn have to expose their own flank to the other maniples.

Polybius is right that the Roman system was much more flexible, and it is clearly geared to take maximum advantage of the legionary's ability to fight in all directions, and even on his own if need be. Further, the smaller units, stationed at intervals, allowed the Romans to handle broken terrain much more easily, weaving around boulders or sinkholes or whatever other irregularities the battlefield presented.

The phalanx could only fight in one direction, and because it was so reliant on its depth (without at least five ranks, you wouldn't have the interleaving pike heads critical to defending the front rank), it required far more troops to be effective. And because it could only fight in one direction, protecting the flanks became even more critical than usual, and it was pretty damn critical already. The best way to protect the flanks was to expand the frontage of the phalanx, with the result that phalanxes tended to deploy, as we have seen in all six of the battles we've examined in this book, as more or less one enormous line. This is necessarily more vulnerable to terrain than a checkerboard deployment, and made the phalanx far more dependent on flat, level ground to prevent gaps from forming in the line.

Generalship

Another thing you may notice when you look at these battles is the role of the general in the fighting. Roman generals certainly could and did participate in battles directly, fighting hand to hand in the front ranks and exposing themselves willingly to danger. In fact, one of the highest honors a Roman general could earn was the *spolia opima* (rich plunder), which were the weapons, armor and other treasure stripped from an enemy leader killed in single combat.

The Romans in the last three battles we examined had a recent example of this – the consul Marcus Claudius Marcellus, who in 222 BC met Viridomarus, king of the Gaesatae tribe of Gauls, in single combat and killed him. The winning of this high honor cemented Marcellus' place in history, and would certainly have

encouraged other Roman generals to get out front in the fighting. This wasn't a one-off event. Over a century and a half later, Julius Caesar would grab a shield and join his own front line fighting against the Nervii in what is now northern France. Casualty rates among Roman centurions were notoriously high, in part due to the culture of valor and risk-taking that dominated.

But at least in the battles we've examined here, that appears to be the exception rather than the rule. Note Flamininus' moving to his right wing at Cynoscephalae when he realized he couldn't salvage things on his left. Witness Paullus moving bodies of troops around as events unfolded at Pydna. The general impression is that the Roman consul led from immediately *behind* the battle line, on horseback, which not only made him more mobile for purposes of acting as an observer and giving orders, but gave him a higher vantage point from which to see the evolution of the battle and to allow him to direct his troops.

That doesn't appear to be the case with Hellenistic generals. They were stamped in the mold of Alexander the Great, a general famous for his personal role as a warrior. In many of his most famous battles, Alexander charged at the head of his cavalry, acting as a tactical unit in the fight and personally giving and receiving blows, almost at the cost of his life at the Battle of the Granicus in 334 BC. It is believed that Alexander set his troops in line before the battle, but once the order was set, he abdicated actual command to his subordinates in favor of acting as a fighting cavalryman.

Remember that all of the Hellenistic generals we've examined in this book were descendants of the successors of Alexander, and likely considered themselves the rightful inheritors of his legacy. The stories of his personal valor and style of command would have been much fresher to them than they are to us.

We see this in the behavior of the generals here. Pyrrhus of Epirus is always in the thick of the fighting, and is killed, though not in the most heroic manner, in a battle. We see Philip V personally leading his troops on the ridge at Cynoscephalae, and Antiochus leading the cavalry charge that breaks the Roman left at Magnesia. It seems likely that they, in the tradition of Alexander, were happy to lay out their general plans for the battle and then leave it to their subordinate commanders to enact it while they rode off to fight.

This makes sense in the plodding, defensive context of the phalanx. Here was a formation that wasn't expected to move much. It was supposed to be laid out in a position and then to hold that position, or to march straight forward from it, while other units conducted any more complex maneuvers required. In fact, it's generally considered that during the time of Alexander at least, the phalanx's job wasn't to win the battle at all, but merely to pin the enemy battle line in place long enough for Alexander and his heavy cavalry to strike the critical blow that would begin the rout. The formation's tremendous depth, along with the difficulty of maneuvering with the enormous pike, lend it to this style of generalship. We don't see Hellenistic generals breaking off pieces of their phalanxes to respond to contingencies the way the unnamed Roman tribune does at Cynoscephalae. We also don't really see them rallying up small units of

phalangites as Marcus does the Roman routers at Magnesia.

It's possible that this focus on personal heroism on the part of the commander deprived the phalanx of much needed leadership in the thick of battle, but it's equally possible that it was simply part of the Hellenistic military ecosystem. A static, defensive formation like the phalanx wouldn't require as much attention from the general of the entire army, freeing him to engage in the kind of personal heroism that would inspire everyone, boost morale and thus prevent the infectious panic that could be the end of a battle.

Some of this may also be due to the nature and position of the Hellenistic versus the Roman leader. Romans had despised the word *rex* (king) ever since the expulsion of Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, Rome's last king, in 509 BC, and the government of the Republic was carefully devised to prevent any one person from amassing too much personal power. A Roman consul was, despite his enormous authority, a servant of the Roman *civitas*, the social body of Roman citizens. Abstracting loyalty to a state, instead of a person, is a sophisticated concept, and one that the Romans excelled at, at least until their first civil war. Personal glory was absolutely a priority for the Roman consul, and Rome's history is rife with unnecessary military action specifically brought on by a Roman public official's need to win glory in battle. This need was driven partly by the limited term of office. Roman commanders only held *imperium* for a short period, and once it expired, so did their authority to lead an army. But, at least conceptually, the Roman consul was a public servant.

The Hellenistic king was a royal monarch. His military authority never waned. The army, like everything else in his kingdom, was his personal property.

Command and Control, Independence of Action and Initiative

There's something else I notice as I examine these six battles, and that is the extent to which command and control is pushed down to the lowest level in the Roman army.

Command and control (also known as "C2") is a modern military concept that refers simply to the ability to command military actions and personnel. C2 obviously accrues to the highest in rank, who have the authority to make more and bigger decisions. When that C2 is assigned to officers and soldiers of lower rank, it's said to be "pushed down" or "pushed out" to a lower level. This is a judgment-neutral statement, and military theorists can disagree about whether or when pushing C2 down is a good idea. The Coast Guard is known for pushing C2 down as far as it can. When I was serving, we had senior enlisted personnel (not officers) in command of 87-foot patrol cutters, armed ships worth nearly \$10 million dollars.

I see a lot of evidence of distributed C2 in the army of the Roman Republic that isn't in evidence in their Hellenistic opponents. We've already talked a little about the power and influence of the Roman centurion, and we've seen them taking individual initiatives at Pydna to get their troops into the phalanx as the

gaps opened up. We also know that senior centurions participated directly in counsel with the consular leadership of the Roman army, and that there was some interplay between these operational leaders and the highest ranks of Roman society, as evidenced by the 1st century AD Roman consul C. Silius Italicus' poem *Punica*, which tells the story of the centurion Ennius, whose feats endeared him to the famous Scipio family to the degree that he was buried in their family plot.

I have already mentioned that the casualties among Roman centurions were extremely high. Julius Caesar, writing in the 1st century BC, describes casualties at the Battle of Pharsalus in 48 BC, where Roman centurions (per capita) died around 700 percent more frequently than *milites* (soldiers, common legionaries). This is a clear indicator of the personal initiative they were expected to show in leading their troops into combat, and may be an indicator of a military culture that encouraged the seizing of tactical initiative at this comparatively low level. We also hear of the *velites* wearing animal skins over their helmets, in part to distinguish themselves and make themselves visible to their superiors who could then mark them out for reward, promotion or praise. This isn't absolute proof, but it is certainly evidence of individual initiative on the part of the average soldier.

But we have more concrete examples, and in the battles we examine here, no less. At Cynoscephalae, we see a tribune feeling confident enough in his ability to make major strategic decisions without consulting his general or the overall commander, to the degree where he wheels off 20 maniples from the rear of the line to execute a flanking maneuver that may well have won the battle.

At Magnesia, we see a tribune taking it upon himself not only to rally fleeing troops, but to punish them with death, re-form them, and then lead them in a countercharge, all on his own initiative and without any consultation.

At Pydna, we see an allied commander make the call to throw the unit standard into the enemy ranks in order to motivate his own troops. It's a precursor of Caesar's standard-bearer in 55 BC, jumping into the sea to motivate his frightened comrades. All of these decisions appear to be self-initiated, made in a split second, and without consulting higher command.

Correlation is not causation, and these are just a few data points, but they are enough to give the feeling of a military culture that rewarded initiative and personal resourcefulness to the degree where comparatively lower-ranking individuals felt comfortable making operational decisions.

We have no comparative examples in the Hellenistic armies we've examined. At Heraclea, Megacles dons Pyrrhus' armor, a decision which, if anything, nearly jeopardizes the outcome of the battle. At Cynoscephalae, Nicanor hurries with his foraging troops in a column over the ridge, at the command of his superior. Nicanor is unable to make any tactical decision that might have saved his men, such as forming them up before setting off. We don't hear much of individual brilliance during the battles we've examined. Some of this may be due to history being written by the winners, but reckoned as a whole with the cohesive nature

of the phalanx, the royal system of government that accrued all personal power with a king, a picture of a more rigid system that discouraged individual initiative starts to make itself seen.

Legacy

The medieval and early modern world saw their share of phalanxes. There's a great translation of Aelian's tactics published in 1616 by John Bingham under the title of *The Tactiks of Aelian or Art of Embattailing an Army After Ye Grecian Manner Englished & Illustrated Wth [sic] Figures Throughout: & Notes Vpon Ye Chapters of Ye Ordinary Motions of Ye Phalange*. The book is remarkable for, apart from its great title and equally amusing English, its illustrations of phalangites in 17th century armor. They wear the crested morion-style helmets you might see on one of Cortes' *conquistadores*, and iron peascod breastplates over buff leather coats. These men are as far from a Hellenistic phalangite as you could imagine, but the legacy is clear and the connection to it is powerful.

The fact remains that the people reading Bingham's translation of Aelian weren't doing so for nostalgia's sake. The 17th century AD was every bit as bloody as the 3rd century BC, and the commanders looking to writers like Aelian were hard-bitten war leaders like the Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus and the Holy Roman Empire's general Count Albrecht von Wallenstein. They were looking to the ancient world because they genuinely believed that the military methodology of the period still had value, and it's fair to argue that it did. The "pike and shot" formations that were the core of 17th century armies married the Hellenistic phalanx of pikemen with the emerging firearms of the period.

Even here we see the legacy of the ancient world. The matchlock arquebus (an early type of firearm), much like the Hellenistic pike, was of little use on its own. It was only truly effective deployed in a tightly packed formation that could pour on concentrated volumes of fire. Worse, it was incredibly slow to reload, far slower than the bows and javelins that were still used on early modern battlefields. In order to employ them effectively, you had to marshal thousands of arquebusiers to maneuver, reload and fire in perfect unison, as part of a giant and complex formation.

There's only one way this kind of military operation can be accomplished: constant and relentless drill. Make no mistake: these are concepts that grew out of the ancient military experience and of the legion and the phalanx in particular. It may seem like a silly point. Of course all soldiers drill constantly. How else would they ever be effective? The truth is that in pre-modern armies, it's a lot rarer than you think. Outside the organized city-state cultures we've examined here, many cultures fought as warbands, and even inside them, they could frequently not resist the temptation to pursue individual honor and glory at the expense of critical unit cohesion.

But even if it seems simple, even if it seems commonplace, it remains the fact that the notions of troop cohesion, drill, keeping formation and even conceptions

modern professional militaries take for granted (numbered corps, uniform standards, military retirement, span of control, etc ...) reached a level of refinement in these two formations that endures to this day. The legion and the phalanx certainly didn't invent these concepts, but they cemented them. They are timeless because these concepts are universal and effective. They endure, all around us, every day.

Let me put it another way. Most people would never question if a cartoon or a beautiful piece of commercial advertising could be considered art. But the whole reason people have this broad, expansive definition of what art is, is because Andy Warhol dared to exhibit a stack of Brillo boxes in New York's Stable art gallery in 1964. They weren't actual Brillo soap pads boxes; he had made exact replicas. Art critics to this day still argue the merits of this audacious exhibit, but nearly all agree that the most important thing Warhol did with this exhibit was force the world at large to ask themselves the question: "What is art?"

The result was a massive cultural shift. Over half a century later, we still think of art differently because of Warhol, whether we live in New York City or Kathmandu. The same is true of the legion and the phalanx. In their organization, *esprit de corps*, deployment, method of arming, and in hundreds of other fine details, they represent an expression of how people mobilize for war that seems so incredibly *familiar*. The society I live in, and the military I served in, couldn't be more different from ancient Rome or Macedon, and yet there is so much in the story of these two formations that resonates with me, and makes me feel a link going back down thousands of years.

Perhaps what's most fascinating about the legion and the phalanx is how they were, ultimately, expressions of culture – of a Rome struggling to come to grips with brutal Celtic invasions that swept away its burgeoning hoplite phalanx and put its nascent city to the sack. Of a fractious Greece with disparate city-states constantly striving against one another, until the threat of the enormous Persian Empire gave them a common enemy, if only for a little while. These cultures bled into and informed one another, and in a way we can see the conflict between the legion and the phalanx as a conflict between two branches of Greek legacy, drifting apart and then coming together again.

But in the end, it is this above all: a great story, full of blood and sweat and adventure and more than anything – *people*, fascinating, complicated and ambitious.

In other words – us.



ILLUSTRATIONS



The Stele of Vultures, created sometime between the 26th and 24th centuries BC, depicts an early phalanx of spearmen with overlapping shields. (DEA/G. DAGLI ORTI/Getty Images)



Detail from the famous 7th century BC Chigi Vase showing two classical hoplite phalanxes clashing. Though the *porpax* and *antilabe* are omitted, we have a good view of the inside of the shields and can see how the *aspis* was held. (DEA/G. NIMATALLAH/Getty Images)



18th century AD depiction of the great Theban general Epaminondas, whose reforms to the deployment of the phalanx helped spur its evolution. (Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images)





Lunettes from the 2nd century BC Macedonian tomb of Lyson and Kallikles, showing the full range of Hellenistic war gear: cuirasses, helmets, swords, shields and greaves. (ART Collection/Alamy)



An early 4th century BC Phrygian-type helmet, without cheek-pieces. Note the plume-holder on the side. These helmets were popular with phalangites during the period described by this book.
(Photo by DeAgostini/Getty Images)



Details from a 4th century BC fresco depicting Hellenistic soldiers. At the top, we see many examples of the *peltē*, including some idea of how they were decorated. We also see examples of *linothorakes* and plumed helmets. Below, we see two Hellenistic (likely Antigonid) soldiers. Their spears are too short to be *sarissae*, and lack connecting tubes. They wear the *kausia*, the ancient Macedonian flat hat. Above them are two decorated shields which are probably too large to have been meant to be *peltai*. (ART Collection/Alamy)



Phalangite war-gear. 1) Phrygian-type helmet. 2) Thracian-type helmet. 3) Extraordinary Phrygian helmet that would only have been used by a rich, powerful warrior. 4) Bronze muscle-cuirass, hinged at the sides. 5) Bronze muscle half-cuirass, protecting only the front of the body.

6) Famous iron *linothorax* found in the tomb of Philip II at Vergina. No common phalangite would have used something so fine, but it gives a good idea of how a linen cuirass would have been constructed, like the one shown at 8). 7) Swords, a straight-bladed *xiphos* and a cleaver-like *kopis*. (Christa Hook © Osprey Publishing)



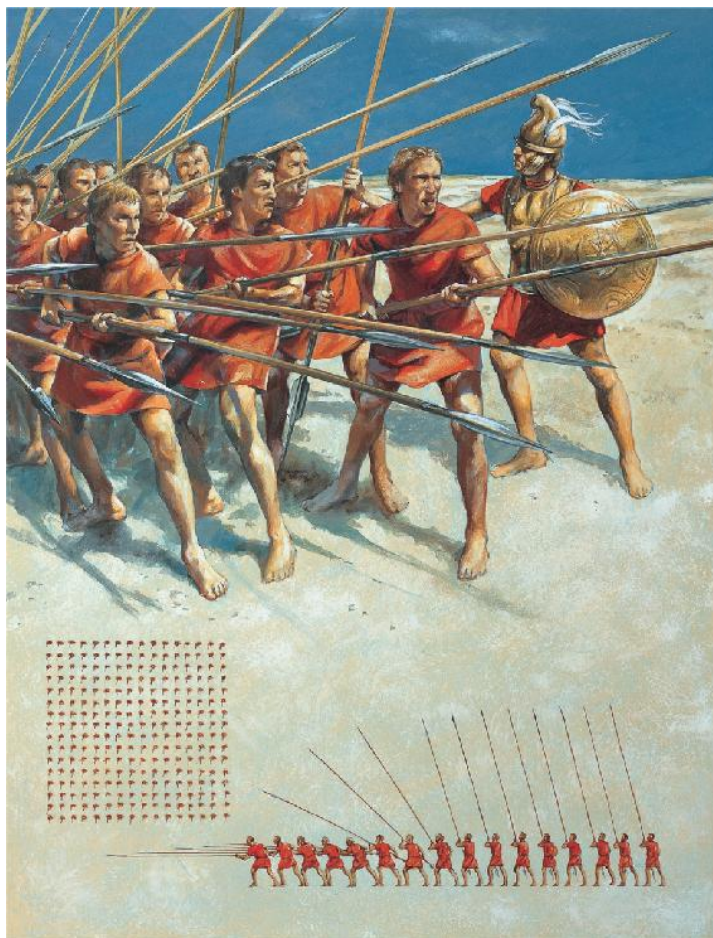
Late 4th century BC bronze spear-butt. The letters “MAK” – the M and part of the A are visible inscribed between the parallel lines to the right – give evidence for Macedonian state-issued weapons. (Shefton Collection, Newcastle University, Great North Museum: Hancock, UK © Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums/Bridgeman Images)



A Hellenistic (likely Antigonid) slinger shows his *kestromes* (an ancient sling that threw darts instead of stones) to a phalangite. The phalangite wears a Thracian-type bronze helmet, a *linothorax* with a *xiphos* in a scabbard, and bronze greaves of the strap-on type, with the straps clearly shown. He carries a *sarissa*, giving us a clear view of the flanged butt-spike. He also carries a bronze-faced *peltē*, possibly marking him as a member of the Bronze Shields elite corps. (© Johnny Shumate)



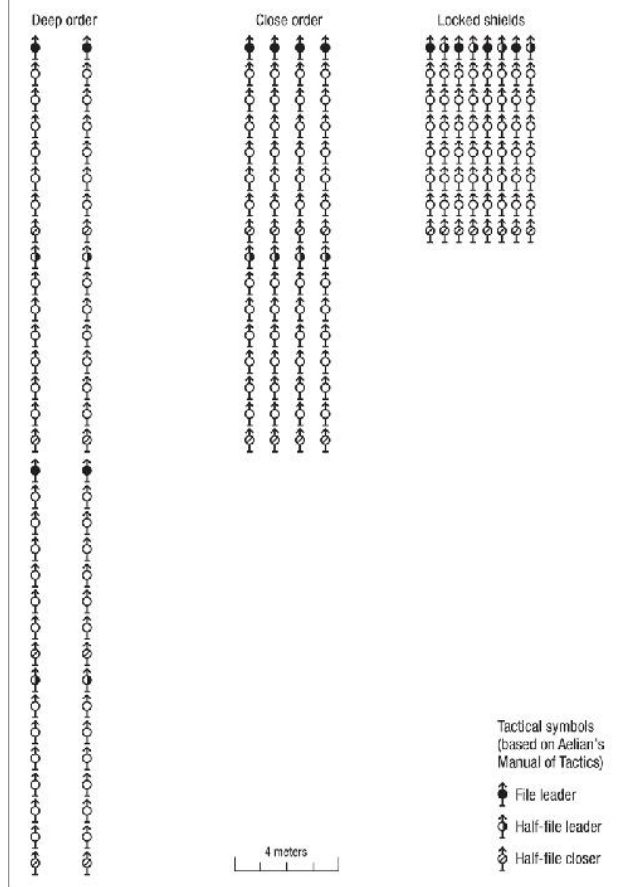
Reconstruction of a Hellenistic *pezhetairos* ("foot companion" or phalangite) carrying his disassembled *sarissa* (pike) in two pieces. Note the iron connecting tube at the top end of one of the pieces. He wears a Phrygian-type helmet, greaves of the clip-on variety, and a linen cuirass. 1) shows the layers of linen in the cuirass. 2) shows a bronze-faced *peltē*, embossed with the Vergina Sun, the device of the Macedonian kingdom. He is gripping the shield handle, but would be able to slip his arm through it, leaving the hand free to hold his pike. He wears a *kopis* (a cleaver-like sword). (Christa Hook © Osprey Publishing)



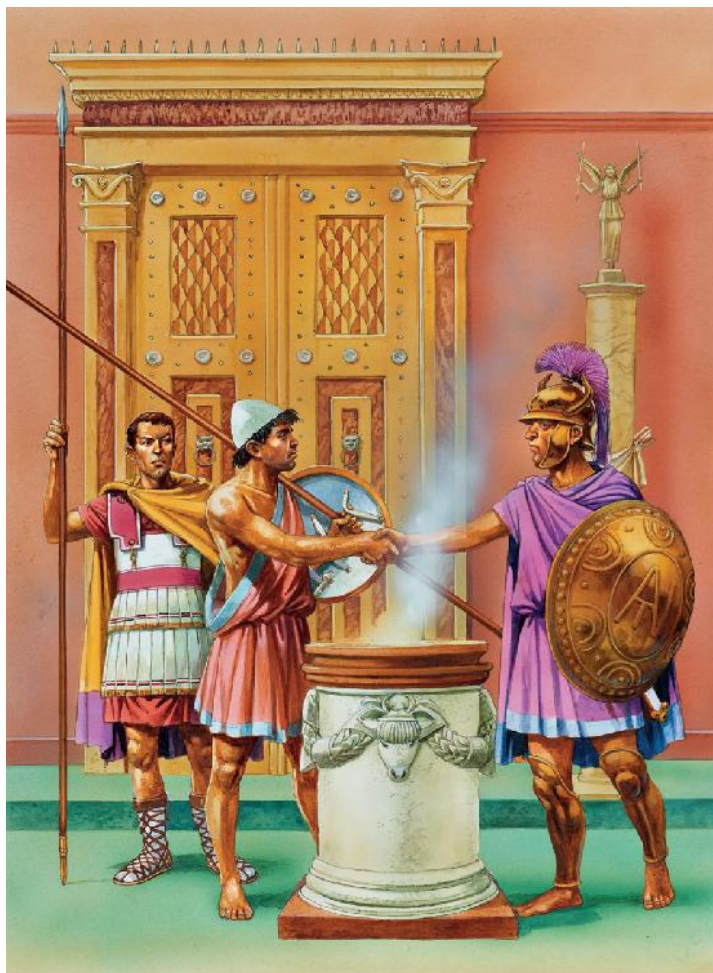
Reconstruction of a group of phalangites training under the watchful eye of an officer. Note the bottom of the page, which shows a *speira* of 256 phalangites, formed in 16 files (each is a *lochos*)

16 ranks deep. Four of these *lochoi* form a *tetrarchia*, and the four *tetrarchiai* form the *speira* shown here. The reconstruction also shows a side view of a single *lochos*. Note that the first five phalangites have their pikes leveled at the enemy, with each subsequent phalangite inclining his pike at a steeper angle, creating a forest of pike shafts and heads that helped to provide a canopy that could deflect missiles. (Christa Hook © Osprey Publishing)

Infantry files



Diagrams of phalanx files (*lochoi*) seen from overhead. The left diagram shows the phalanx deployed at double depth, as they were at Cynoscephalae in chapter VII. The middle diagram shows the phalanx deployed in the “compact” (*meson*) formation, which would have been the most common. The right diagram shows the “locked shields” (*synaspismos*) formation. (Bounford © Osprey Publishing)



Reconstruction of Antigonid troops based on a fresco from around 280 BC. Note the white *linothorax* of the figure on the left and the *agēma* tunic worn by the central figure. He carries a *sarissa*, his neck obscuring the connecting tube. His felt cap would have been worn under his helmet as padding. The inside of his *peltē* shows the *porpax* and the *antilabe*. On the right is a king, identifiable by the horns on his Attic-type helmet. He wears bronze clip-on greaves. His bronze-faced shield shows the popular line and dot decoration. The monogram reads “ANT,” likely for “Antigonous.” (Peter Dennis © Osprey Publishing)



A reconstruction of Antigonid troops based on the tomb of Lyson and Kallikles. Both men wear plumed, painted Thracian-type helmets. The figure on the left has his hand on an older *aspis*-style shield of the type used by classical hoplites. The offset rim and the deep bowl allow the warrior to rest the shield on his shoulder. The figure on the right has a bronze-faced *peltē*. His helmet's comb crest matches one on the monument to Paullus' victory at Pydna, leading some scholars to speculate that he is a member of the Chalkaspides (Bronze Shields) corps. He wears strap-on greaves, with the straps clearly shown. (Peter Dennis © Osprey Publishing)



An excellent artist's rendition of a Hellenistic phalanx, capturing its enormous size and the dense thicket of pikes, as well as giving a good account of the diversity of equipment. (© Johnny Shumate)



A bronze muscle-cuirass, of the type that would have been worn by Roman legionaries of the period. (© The Trustees of the British Museum)



A bronze Montefortino-type helmet that would have been common among Roman legionaries of the period. (Photo by CM Dixon/Print Collector/Getty Images)



An excellent reconstruction of a legionary *scutum* (shield). The device is pure guesswork, as we have no reliable source for how these shields were decorated. Note the iron *umbo* (boss) behind which the shield was gripped. This doubled as a sort of metal boxing glove for punching attacks.
(© Esther Carré)



A great reconstruction of a “Mainz” pattern *gladius hispaniensis*, the sword used to such deadly effect by the Roman legionary. (© Esther Carré)



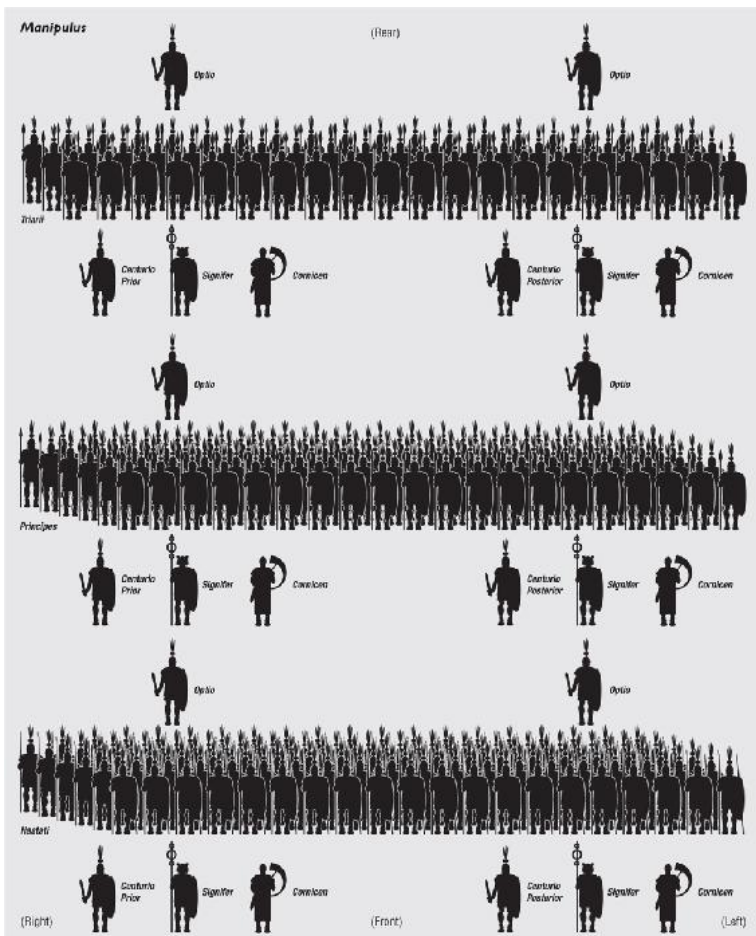
Reconstruction of a Roman *hastatus* from the time of the Pyrrhic War. The main figure wears his Montefortino-type bronze helmet, bronze pectoral and *gladius hispaniensis* in its scabbard, and carries his two *pila* (javelins) and his *scutum* (shield). Note the iron reinforcing the shield edges. 1) His *pugio* (dagger) which likely would not have been used in combat. 2) *Gladius hispaniensis*. 3) *Pila* (javelins), both the “thick” and “thin” varieties described by Polybius, and 4) both the back and front of the shield, illustrating the handle and reinforcing spine. (Seán Ó’Brógáin © Osprey Publishing)



Reconstruction of a Roman *triarius* from the late 3rd century BC. 1) The woollen rain cloak (*paenula*). 2) Bronze pseudo-Corinthian helmet with crest and feather plumes attached. 3) *Lorica hamata* (mail shirt). 4) Thrusting spear (*hasta*) with its butt-spike. It also shows the complete *triarius* with his helmet plumes removed for the march. He is also holding his *scutum* with iron-band-reinforced top and bottom edges and a central spine. He is also wearing a single bronze greave. 5) The *gladius hispaniensis*, and 6) dagger (*pugio*). (Seán Ó'Brógáin © Osprey Publishing)



Roman legionaries from 218 to 201 BC. 1) *Hastatus*, younger and less experienced. His gear: Montefortino-type helmet, triple-feather crest described by Polybius. Pectoral. *Scutum* (shield) with reinforced edges. Two *pila* with long shanks designed to bend on impact. *Gladius hispaniensis* in a scabbard on his right hip. Bronze strap-on greave on forward leg. 2) *Triarius*, a hardened veteran. His gear: an old hoplite thrusting spear. No javelins. A heavier and more expensive mail shirt. 3) *Veles*, drawn from the youngest and poorest infantry class. A skirmisher, with javelins, helmet covered by an animal skin, and a small, round shield. (Angus McBride © Osprey Publishing)



A diagram of a Roman legion of the period, showing the maniples with their attached officers and staff. Note that this diagram shows fewer *triarii* than the *hastati* or *principes*. This is because the *triarii* deployed in half-size units, with approximately 60 legionaries to a maniple, as opposed to the *principes* and *hastati*, who each fielded approximately 120 legionaries to a maniple. Also note the two centurions (*prior* and *posterior*) who each command the two centuries that make up a maniple. (Bounford © Osprey Publishing)



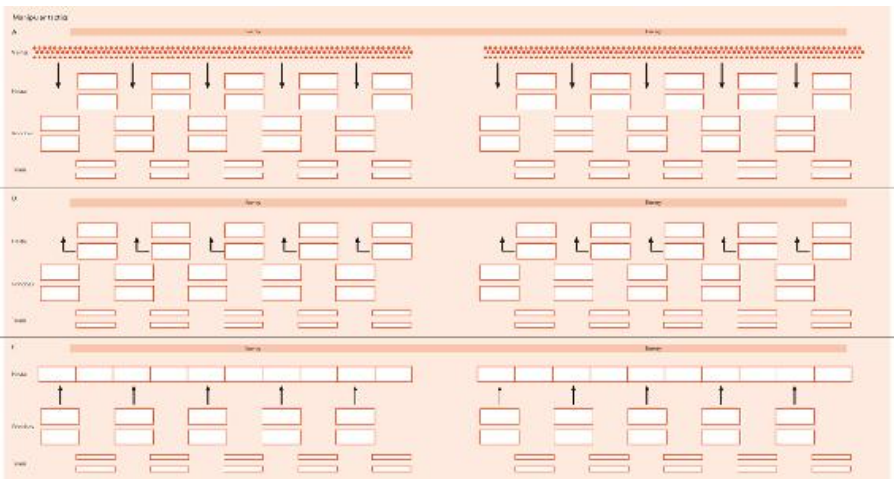
Artist's depiction of a Roman legion engaging an enemy. The *velites* have begun their retreat. The *hastati* have thrown their javelins and are drawing swords to charge. The *principes* are throwing their javelins, and the *triarii* are advancing to provide support, if needed. The different troop classes would have deployed separately, and the depiction of them mixed together indicates an advanced battle or a legion caught by surprise. (© Giuseppe Rava)



Reconstruction of a Roman tribune (left), *signifer* (center) and consul (right). The tribune wears a bronze muscle-cuirass and bronze greaves. The *signifer*, or standard-bearer, wears a mail *lorica hamata*. His *signum* (standard) bears a bronze hand at the top, which symbolized the soldiers' oath. It may also be linked to the unit name of maniples or *manipulus* (Latin for "handful"). The consul wears fine equipment befitting his high status. (Richard Hook © Osprey Publishing)



Artist's depiction of a phalanx-eye view of an approaching Roman legion. We can see the *velites* throwing their javelins, and then fleeing back into the staggered checkerboard (*quincunx*) formation of the advancing legionary maniples. (© Giuseppe Rava)



The manipular system allows the reinforcement of the fighting line with fresh troops, with the intention that their enthusiasm would persuade the whole line to surge forward into contact once again against the fatigued enemy. The reserve lines can reinforce the fighting line if it is coming under pressure, or advance to exploit any successes and breakthroughs it has managed to achieve. The tribunes, who have pressed forward to oversee the fighting, are not there just to inspire the men and witness their behaviour, but also to control the commitment of the second and third lines.

Phase A

The *legio* is drawn up in three lines, initially with its maniples drawn up two centuries deep, the *posterior* behind the *prior*. The battle is begun by the *velites*, who attempt to harass the enemy as it advances with missile fire. On a given signal, the *velites* retire through the gaps.

Phase B

The *velites* through, the *hastati* close the gaps in their line, the *centuria posterior* moving alongside the *centuria prior*. Having dressed their ranks, the *hastati* hurl their *pila*, draw their swords and charge into contact. They now constitute the fighting line of the *legio*.

Phase C

The initial charge has failed to break the enemy, and the momentum of the attack has been dissipated. The *hastati* are now hard pressed, so the *principes* are ordered up to reinforce the fighting line.



Reconstruction of the tactics of an individual legionary, in this case, a *princeps*. First, he throws his “thin” javelin. Next, he throws his “thick” javelin. Third, he draws his sword and charges. Fourth, he punches with his shield boss. Fifth, he thrusts with his sword. (Gerry Embleton © Osprey Publishing)



Pyrrhic troops on the march. We see one of Pyrrhus' elephants, driven by an Indian (possibly Mauryan) handler. The artist has depicted a large elephant capable of carrying a tower with soldiers, but we cannot know for sure that Pyrrhus employed these. The shield on the tower's side bears Pyrrhus' monogram. Marching alongside the elephant, from left to right: a phalangite (his *sarissa* depicted as a single piece of wood with no connecting tube), an Italian allied infantryman with an ornate trilobate pectoral, and an allied Gaulish (Celtic) warrior. (© Johnny Shumate)



Marble bust of Pyrrhus of Epirus, the famous war-leader who defeated Rome in two battles. He was the commander at Heraclea, Asculum and Beneventum, described in chapters IV, V, and VI.
(Leemage/Getty Images)



Ancient coin bearing the portrait of Philip V of Macedon, the Antigonid king who commanded at the Battle of Cynoscephalae, discussed in chapter VII. (© The Trustees of the British Museum)



Artist's depiction of a legion's-eye view of an approaching Pyrrhic phalanx. We can see the thrown javelins bouncing off the thicket of pikes. (© Giuseppe Rava)



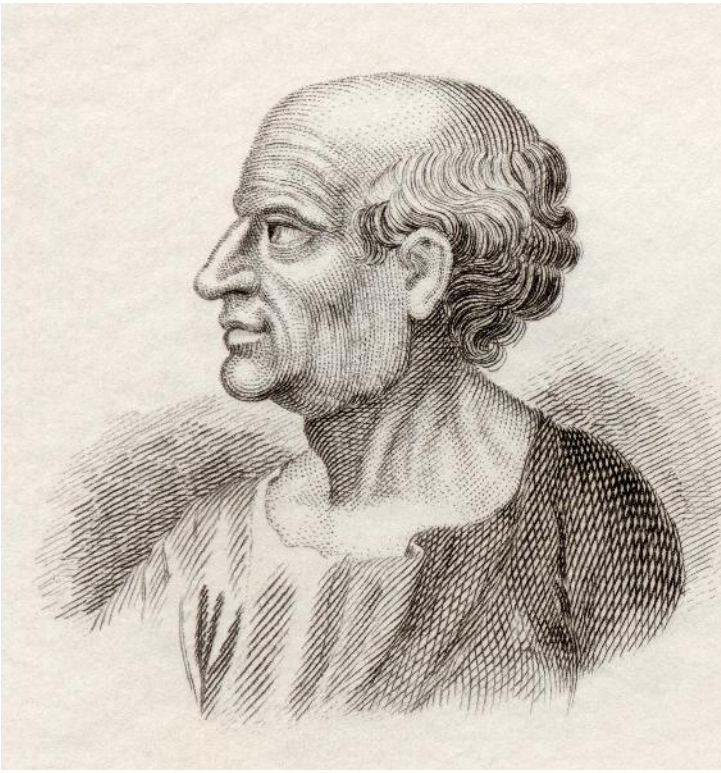
Early 20th century AD depiction of Titus Quinctius Flamininus declaring the “Freedom of the Greeks.” (Bettmann/Getty Images)



View from the top of the eastern gully at Cynoscephalae (with historians Michael Livingston and Kelly DeVries making their way down). This is what the right wing of Philip V's phalanx would have seen as they lowered their pikes and charged. (Author)



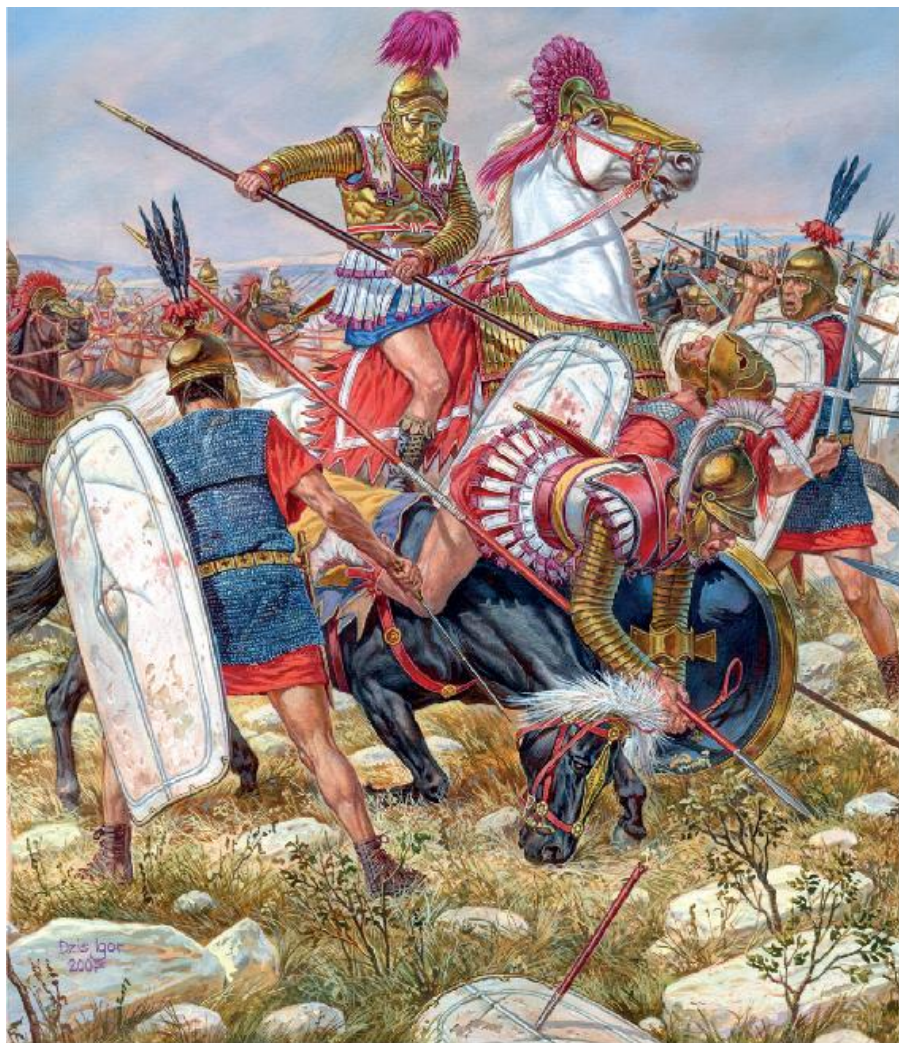
Ancient coin depicting Antiochus III, the Seleucid king who commanded at the Battle of Magnesia, described in chapter VIII. (Photo by CM Dixon/Print Collector/Getty Images)



Early 20th century AD depiction of Cato the Elder, who helped defeat Antiochus III at the Fifth Battle of Thermopylae, helping to set the stage for the later Battle of Magnesia. (Photo by Ken Welsh/Design Pics/Corbis via Getty Images)



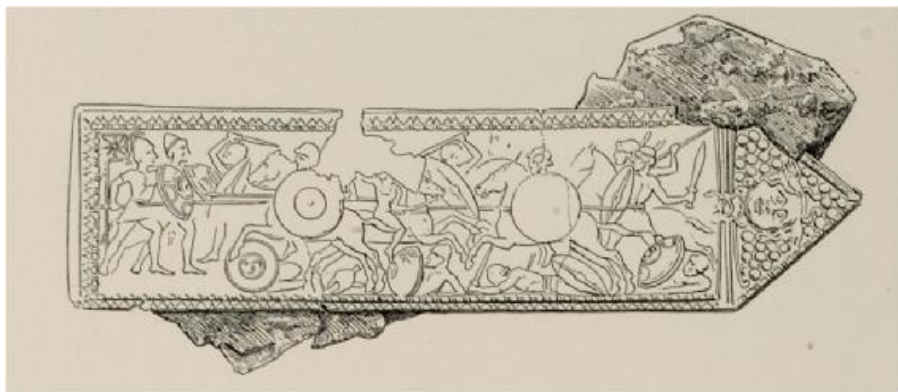
A silver tetradrachm (an ancient coin worth 4 drachmas) depicting Perseus of Macedon, who commanded the Antigonid forces at the Battle of Pydna, discussed in chapter IX. (Ancient Art and Architecture/Alamy)



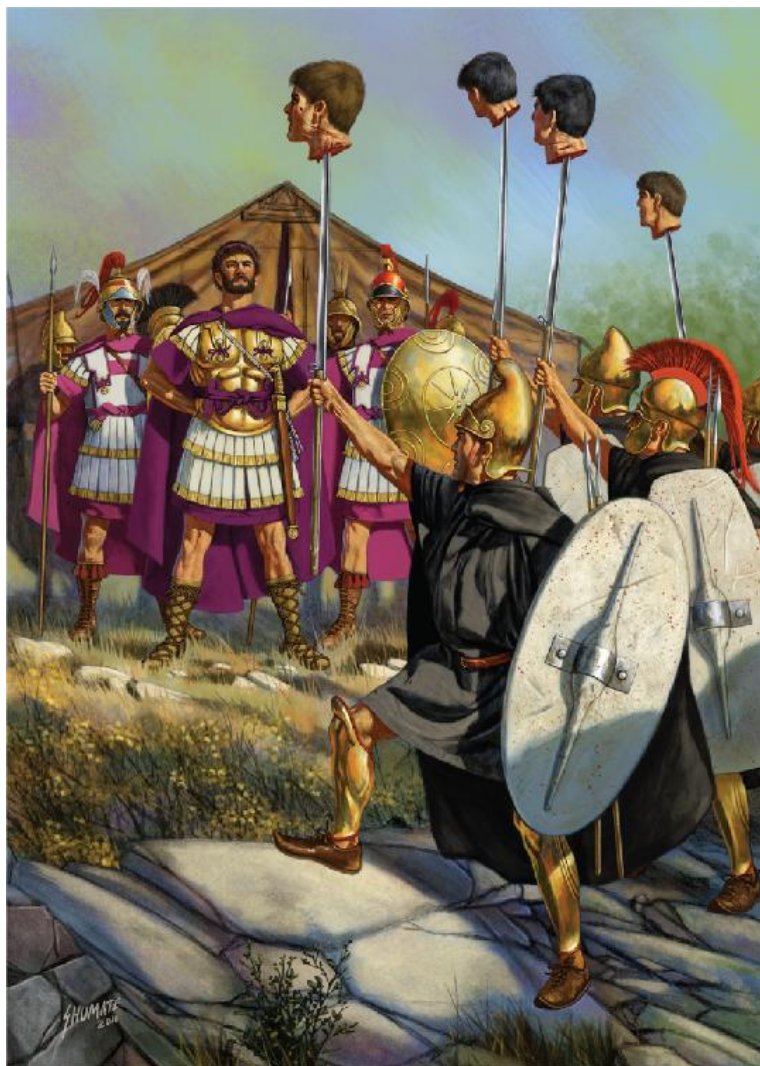
Artist's depiction of Seleucid cataphracts charging the Roman line at the Battle of Magnesia. (© Igor Dzis)



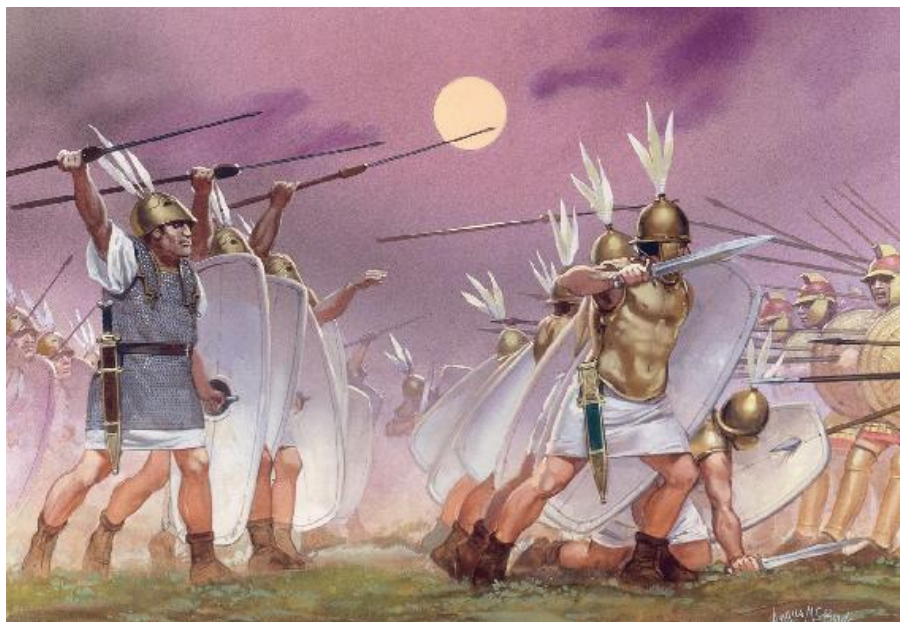
Battle of Magnesia (chapter VIII). This image shows the lack of uniformity on both sides. We see *principes* coming to grips with the Seleucid phalanx. A *hastatus*, with pectoral and Montefortino-type helmet, is on the far left. We see an officer, possibly a tribune, in a silvered muscle-cuirass and helmet. A variety of helmets are on display: Montefortino, Thracian, Chalcidian and pseudo-Corinthian types, some painted on the Seleucid side. Note the thicket of pikes, the suffocating, confused nature of combat as legionaries finally close to their sweet spot and the long pikes become ineffective. (Seán Ó'Brógáin © Osprey Publishing)



A Pergamene bronze likely depicting the Battle of Magnesia in 190 BC, described in chapter VIII. On the left, we can see Seleucid phalangites holding the line against a cavalry charge, likely the Attalids under Eumenes. (Heidelberg University Library, *Altertümer von Pergamon* (Band I, Text 2): *Stadt und Landschaft*, CC-BY-SA 3.0)



Scene from the Battle of Pydna in 168 BC, discussed in chapter IX. Thracian *thureophoroi* display severed Roman heads to Perseus of Macedon. Note the *thureos* shields with the central metal boss and reinforcing spine. We also see their *romphaia*, scythe-sword close-combat weapons. (© Johnny Shumate)



Battle of Pydna (chapter IX). A Roman legion engages Antigonid Chalkaspides (Bronze Shields). Antigonids wear Thracian-type helmets, bronze-faced shields, strap-on greaves, and wield pikes.

The first line of Romans are *hastati*, wearing Montefortino-type helmets and muscle cuirasses. Next come *principes*, wearing mail shirts and pseudo-Corinthian helmets. Finally, we see *triarii*.

This reconstruction is faithful to the Paullus victory monument, and shows an inaccurate uniformity of equipment. The white feathers chosen by the artist were likely black. Although the artist portrays each line as a single rank to fit all figures into the illustration, in reality, each line would be several ranks deep. (Angus McBride © Osprey Publishing)



The battlefield at Pydna, seen from the Antigonid line, looking toward the Roman position.
(Author)



GLOSSARY

The words below are Greek, Latin *and* a few in English. Please note that unit strengths provided in this glossary apply to the period under study in this book (the 3rd to 2nd centuries BC). They change with time, and I ask that readers please keep this in mind when they consider the earlier Hellenistic kingdoms (such as Alexander in his imperial days) or the Roman Principate after the fall of the Republic.

<i>accensi</i>	early Roman skirmishers predating the <i>velites</i> .
Achaean League	a collection of Greek city-states covering the north-central Peloponnese.
<i>aedile</i>	a junior Roman magistrate responsible for the maintenance of temples, the hosting of games and general public order.
<i>agēma</i>	an elite body of troops in Hellenistic armies. The word means “vanguard,” though they did not always serve in that capacity.
<i>agmen quadratrum</i>	“arrangement of squares.” Possibly a reference to the <i>quincunx</i> , or to the hollow square formation, protecting the baggage at the center.
<i>agōgē</i>	the legendary system of Spartan military education.
<i>agōn</i>	“struggle.” This could refer to an athletic contest, a poetry or theater competition, or a battle.
<i>ala</i>	from the Latin for “wing,” the standard unit for Roman allies. Usually stationed on the wings of the citizen legionaries, who held the center of the battle line; hence the name.
<i>alae</i>	plural of <i>ala</i> .
Antigonid	The Hellenistic dynasty descended from Alexander the Great’s general Antigonus

antilabē

araiotaton

Argyraspides

as

aspis

Attic helmet

aquilifer

augur

backfield

battle line

Boeotarch

Boeotian helmet

Boeotian League

I Monophthalmus (Antigonus the One-Eyed). Mostly confined to Macedonia. A modern term; Antigonids are referred to as “Macedonians” in the ancient sources, and sometimes in the modern ones, too. a loop on the rim of the *aspis* that served as a handle.

open-order formation for the Hellenistic phalanx. Used for rapid movement and not practical for combat.

“Silver Shields.” Originally a corps of the army of Alexander the Great, renamed from the hypaspists. Later, a corps of Silver Shields was used in the Seleucid phalanx.

ancient Roman copper coin.

the heavy, round shield used by hoplites.

an ancient style of bronze helmet that usually covered the head and the back of the neck only, leaving the face open for sight and breathing. This helmet was similar to the Chalcidian helmet, save that it lacked even the vestigial nose guard and frequently had a reinforced brow.

the Roman standard bearer who carried the legion’s eagle.

a Roman priest who interpreted omens by studying the flights of birds.

the area of a battlefield behind the battle line.

sometimes called the line of battle. Units of (most often) heavy infantry lined up, more or less shoulder to shoulder, usually laterally, providing as much frontage as possible.

a chief officer of the Boeotian League.

an ancient style of bronze helmet that usually covered the head only, leaving the face open for sight and breathing. It usually had a wide, wavy brim, resembling rippling fabric.

an alliance of Greek city-states led by Thebes.

boēthos

a home guard corps of reservists with defensive duties, consisting of those too old, or too young, to serve on active duty. The *boēthoi* would be called on to garrison towns and forts in the event of an invasion.

boss

the usually round metal bowl positioned in the center of a shield. The boss contained the shield's handle, and provided the warrior with protection for the hand; it also acted as a metal boxing glove for offensive action.

cataphract

from the Greek *kataphraktos*, "completely enclosed," super-heavy cavalry where both horse and rider are completely encased in metal, similar to the much later medieval knight.

centurion

anglicization of *centurio*. Commander of a century. With nearly 100 men under his command, the centurion's span of control makes his duties and acculturation much closer to that of a modern captain/lieutenant (O-3) than it does to a sergeant or other non-commissioned officer.

century

from the Latin *centum* (100). Anglicization of *centuria*. A sub-unit of the Roman maniple consisting of nominally 100 men,

Chalcidian helmet

but in practice usually around 60–80. an ancient style of bronze helmet that usually covered the head, neck and cheeks (via attached cheek pieces), but leaving the face open for sight and breathing. It usually had a vestigial nasal guard that wouldn't have provided real protection to the nose.

Chalkaspides

"Bronze Shields." One of the two main corps of the Antigonid phalanx.

chiliarchia

a unit of four *speirai*, for a total of 1,024 men. Roughly equivalent to a modern large battalion.

chiliarchēs/chiliarch

officer in charge of a *chiliarchia*. Roughly equivalent to a modern

Chrysaepides	colonel. “Gold Shields.” A corps of the Seleucid phalanx.
city-state	often referred to as a <i>polis</i> . A sovereign political entity consisting of a mother city and any dependent territories.
<i>civitas</i>	the concept of the body of Roman citizens united by their culture and law into a public body.
<i>classis</i>	under the Servian reforms, that segment of the population who could afford the <i>hopla</i> and could therefore serve in the Roman phalanx.
<i>cognomen</i>	Roman third name. Initially nicknames, they eventually became hereditary.
cohesion	the ability for military formations to <i>stay</i> in formation even when they’re moving and fighting.
consul	the highest military/political office in the Roman Republic. Two consuls were elected annually and each alternated in holding <i>imperium</i> for a month.
Corinthian helmet	an ancient style of bronze helmet that usually covered the entire face and neck, with a Y- or T-shaped opening for sight and breathing.
<i>cornicen</i>	the trumpeter in a Roman legion. He also acted as the centurion’s assistant.
<i>crista transversa</i>	“transverse crest.” The side-to-side helmet crest of a Roman centurion.
cubit	a unit of measurement: a cubit is about 18 inches, the distance between your elbow and the tip of your longest finger.
cuirass	body armor of any material. Usually implies both breast and backplate.
<i>curia</i>	“a gathering of armed men.” An ancient Roman voting assembly.
<i>cursus honorum</i>	the succession of public offices that a Roman was expected to hold before becoming consul.
<i>dediticii</i>	conquered peoples forced into permanent military alliance with Rome.
<i>deditio</i>	the act of becoming a <i>dediticius</i> .

<i>devotio</i>	a Roman custom in which commanders of losing armies charged straight into the enemy with the full knowledge that it was suicide. Such acts were thought to bring the favor of the gods, who would turn the tide of battle and grant victory to Rome.
<i>dilectus</i>	the Roman system of levy, by which men were called up for military service.
<i>diadochi</i>	see <i>successors</i> .
<i>dimoiritēs</i>	half-file leader in a <i>lochos</i> .
<i>dorū/dory</i>	a 6–8-foot spear used by hoplites.
double envelopment	an envelopment of both flanks simultaneously.
<i>drachma</i>	an ancient Greek coin.
envelopment	a state of affairs where a unit or battle line has greater frontage than the enemy unit or battle line, and thus is able to curl inward and attack the enemy from both the front and the flank.
<i>epistatēs</i>	“guy behind.” The soldier in the even numbered positions (second, fourth, sixth, etc) of a <i>lochos</i> counting from the front of the file.
<i>equites</i>	Roman cavalry.
<i>eromenos</i>	the younger boy in a homosexual relationship with an older man who usually also served as a mentor and patron, in Ancient Greece.
<i>evocatus</i>	“call out.” System of mobilizing reserves for the Roman army.
<i>extraordinarii</i>	“extraordinary ones.” Elite troops from the Roman <i>alae</i> picked out for special service. These camped near the consul and were used for special tasks, such as vanguard or rearguard duty, or reconnaissance missions.
file	a vertical arrangement of troops in a column, front to back.
flank	the side of an enemy unit or battle line.
<i>formula togatorum</i>	a list of military-aged males provided to Rome by the <i>socii</i> .
frontage	the lateral (left to right) distance covered

	by a military unit. The greater the frontage, the greater the chance to envelop an enemy unit or battle line, and the lesser the chance of being enveloped by the enemy.
<i>gens</i>	a grouping of Roman families that shared a common heritage.
<i>gladius Hispaniensis</i>	often just referred to as <i>gladius</i> , the Roman short sword.
<i>greaves</i>	shin and sometimes knee protection of any material.
<i>hasta</i>	a spear.
<i>hastati</i>	“spearmen.” A class of Roman legionary who deployed in the first line of the <i>triplex acies</i> . Made up of younger and less experienced troops.
<i>heavy infantry</i>	the term used to refer to the weight of the soldiers’ equipment (meaning they’re heavily armed and armored), and sometimes referring to the tightness of their formation (they generally fight formed up in close order, and not in loose or dispersed order). Heavy infantry are primarily used for close or “shock” combat.
<i>hecatomb</i>	a sacrifice of 100 cattle.
<i>hēgemones</i>	“leaders.” Possibly officers in a Hellenistic phalanx, or possibly every phalangite in the front of his file.
<i>Hellenic</i>	having to do with Greece.
<i>Hellenistic</i>	having to do with those cultures and polities who were heavily influenced by Greece, but not actually Greek themselves, such as the Macedonians, Epirotes and the successor dynasties of the Antigonids, Ptolemies and Seleucids. Also refers to the time period during/after the rise of Alexander the Great.
<i>hemithorakion</i>	half-cuirass that covers the abdomen.
<i>hetairoi</i>	“companions.” The close associates of a Hellenistic king.
<i>hippeis</i>	a term for Greek cavalry, that in later years came to indicate high social status, similar to the Roman <i>equites</i> . <i>Hippeis</i>

hoplite

might not necessarily be horsemen, and might serve as elite infantry.

hoplitēs in Greek, a citizen-soldier of ancient Greek city-states. Hoplites formed the heavy infantry backbone of their armies. From the Greek *hopla*, which refers to their equipment.

hypaspist

“shieldbearer.” The “shieldbearers” were an elite unit under Philip II and Alexander the Great, probably fighting as hoplites.

imperium

“the power to command.” Military authority in ancient Rome.

infra classem

under the Servian reforms, that segment of the population who could not afford the *hopla*, and therefore could not serve in the phalanx, acting as light troops instead.

kausia

an ancient Macedonian felt hat. Broad and slightly conical. Looks kind of like you’re wearing a pancake on your head. from the Greek *koptō*, “to cut,” a sword with a slightly curving blade sharp on one side, like a cleaver. Sometimes used as a side arm by Hellenistic phalangites.

kōnos

a Hellenistic bronze helmet very similar (or possibly identical to) the *pilos*.

knēmides

greaves.

legatus

“legate.” A Roman of senatorial rank who usually commanded one of the two legions under each consul.

legio

from *legere* (to choose), the basic heavy infantry formation of Rome after the regal period. Usually around 5,000 strong.

legion

anglicization of *legio*.

Leukaspides

“White Shields,” one of the two main corps in the Antigonid phalanx. Likely inferior to the *Chalkaspides*.

leves

Roman skirmishers pre-dating the *velites*.

light infantry

term used to refer to the weight of the soldiers’ equipment (meaning they’re lightly armed and armored), and

	sometimes referring to the looseness of their formation (they generally fight in open or dispersed order, and not in close order). Light infantry is primarily used for skirmishing, or to hold terrain that would disrupt the cohesion of heavy infantry.
<i>linothorax</i>	Greek/Hellenistic linen body armor.
<i>lochagos</i>	leader of a <i>lochos</i> , roughly equivalent to a modern 2nd lieutenant.
<i>lochos</i>	in Hellenistic armies, a file of 16 phalangites. Roughly equivalent to a modern platoon.
<i>lorica hamata</i>	Roman body armor made of interlocking metal rings. In use during the period studied in this book.
<i>lorica segmentata</i>	Roman body armor made from articulating steel bands. Not in use during the period studied in this book.
Magna Graecia	“Greater Greece.” Southern Italy colonized by the Greeks.
Mamertines	“Sons of Mars.” A group of Italian mercenaries brought to Sicily from their home in Campania.
maniple	from the Latin <i>manipulus</i> (handful). A sub-unit of the Roman legion consisting of two centuries.
<i>meson</i>	intermediate formation of a Hellenistic phalanx. Allows approximately 3-foot distance for each phalangite.
<i>miles</i>	a common soldier, a legionary.
Montefortino helmet	an ancient style of bronze helmet that usually covered the head only. Favored by Roman and Celtic warriors.
morale	the ability of soldiers to continue toward their operational goal (attacking or defending a position) in the face of injuries, casualties or other adverse battlefield conditions. When morale fails, soldiers rout.
<i>ochanē</i>	a cloth or leather strap from which phalangites hung their shields, looping around the neck and shoulders.

<i>ocrae</i>	graveyards.
<i>oikos</i>	household. A confusing term that is used differently in different sources. Generally refers to the family, the house and extended holdings.
<i>optio</i>	a centurion's second-in-command. Roughly the equivalent of a modern 1st lieutenant.
order of battle	a term used to describe the structure of a military force. Includes command structure, strength and disposition of personnel.
<i>othismos</i>	"the push." Describes the act of two hoplite phalanxes shoving one another in an effort to break the opposing line.
<i>ouragos</i>	file closer (soldier in the last position) in a <i>lochos</i> .
outflank	a maneuver wherein a unit is able to attack an enemy from its flank. Sometimes referred to as "turning the flank."
<i>pankration</i>	"all-force." A kind of mixed martial art that combined throws, holds, punches, kicks and whatever else you could think of, apart from biting and eye-gouging.
<i>partheniae</i>	"sons of virgins." The bastard sons of unmarried Spartan women.
<i>paterfamilias</i>	the male head of a Roman family.
Peloponnesian League	an alliance of Greek city-states led by Sparta.
<i>peltē</i>	shield usually used by phalangites, and also by other soldiers in Hellenistic armies. Smaller than the <i>aspis</i> and not as concave. Ripped to allow the left hand to protrude past the shield rim to enable the phalangite to use his pike with both hands.
<i>peltastai</i>	a body of soldiers bearing the <i>peltē</i> . Sometimes the Anglicization of this, "peltasts," refers to phalangites with the <i>peltē</i> , but it is also used to refer to javelin-armed skirmishers, most frequently from Thrace.
<i>pezhetairoi</i>	"foot companions." A body of

phalangite

phalangites. It is debated whether this term was used for an elite unit within a Hellenistic phalanx, or was simply the term applied to everyone in the phalanx. a soldier serving in a Hellenistic (*not* in a classical hoplite) phalanx.

phalanx

a rectangular heavy infantry formation that consists of soldiers with adjacent or overlapping shields and spears or pikes. The basic heavy infantry formation of both the Hellenic and Hellenistic worlds.

phalarae

metal medallions used to indicate honors in a Roman legion.

Phrygian helmet

See Thracian helmet.

pila

plural for *pilum*.

pilos

a brimless, conical, felt cap worn in ancient Greece.

***pilos* helmet**

an ancient bronze helmet mimicking the shape of the *pilos*. This helmet only provided protection for the head, leaving the face and neck entirely bare. javelin used by Roman legionaries. Iron, pyramidal head on the end of a long, thin metal shank attached to a wooden shaft. Most legionaries carried two, one heavy and one light.

pilum

a city-state in ancient Greece.

polis

plural for *polis*.

poleis

porpax

a metal loop for the left forearm used in both the *aspis* and *peltē*.

posterior

“behind.” The junior of the two centurions in a manipule.

praefectus sociorum

“prefect of the allies.” A Roman officer whose authority/span of control roughly approximated that of a modern colonel (in land or air service) or a captain (in maritime service) in charge of a Roman *ala*.

praetor

commander of a Roman field army, and also a senior Roman magistrate.

primus pilus

also known as *primipilus*, “First javelin.”

principes

The senior centurion of a legion.

“leaders.” A class of Roman legionary

prior

who deployed in the second line of the *triplex acies*. Made up of men in the prime of their lives with some battle experience.

“before.” The senior of the two centurions in a manipule.

protostatēs

“guy in front.” Soldier in the odd numbered positions (first, third, fifth, etc) of a *lochos* counting from the front of the file.

pseudo-Corinthian helmet

an ancient style of bronze helmet similar to the Corinthian helmet, but the nose-protection and eye holes have all shrunk to a purely decorative size, and now sit high up on the forehead. Frequently employed cheek pieces, a flaring brim and at least one plume holder.

psiloi

From *psilos* meaning “naked” or “bare.” The Greek term for skirmishers.

pteryges

“feathers.” A skirt of fabric or leather flaps that protected the abdomen, groin or legs.

Ptolemies

the Hellenistic dynasty descended from Alexander the Great’s general Ptolemy I Soter (“the Savior”). Mostly confined to what is now modern Egypt.

pugio

a dagger carried by Roman soldiers. Some believe it to be a side arm, others a camp tool, and possibly both.

pyknosis

see *meson*.

pyrokaussis

“fire-burn.” Term possibly used to indicate the campfire around which the members of a *lochos* would eat together. a modern term used to describe the deployment of the Roman *triplex acies*. It references the checkerboard pattern of dots on the five-side of a six-sided die.

quincunx

a horizontal arrangement of troops in a row, side to side.

rank

**rearguard
reserve**

the trailing part of a military formation. troops kept back from the fighting and committed by the general where and when they are needed as the battle evolves.

retreat <i>rhomphaia</i>	an orderly, fighting withdrawal from a battle. a scythe-like weapon favored by Thracians that was half sword, half polearm, with a blade as long as the haft.
rout	fleeing from a fight with no attempt to keep order or defend oneself.
Sacred Band	an elite unit of Thebes, composed of 150 pairs of homosexual lovers. Greek historians have also described an elite unit of the Carthaginian army as a "Sacred Band."
<i>sarissa</i>	Hellenistic pike anywhere from 15 to 26 feet long.
satrap	a provincial governor under the Persian Empire.
<i>sauroter</i>	"lizard-killer." A butt-spike, usually made of bronze, and employed on both the pike and the spear.
<i>scutum</i>	large, oval shield with a central boss used by Roman legionaries.
Seleucid	the Hellenistic dynasty descended from Alexander the Great's general Seleucus I Nicator ("the Conqueror"). Mostly confined to modern Turkey and the Levant.
Servian reforms	military reforms introduced by the Roman king Servius Tullius.
skirmishers	troops whose primary role is to use missiles to wound or kill enemy troops, and to retreat before coming into close contact.
<i>signifer</i>	standard bearer in a Roman legion. Acted as the unit's banker.
<i>socii</i>	Italian tribes and <i>poleis</i> in a permanent (and unequal) military alliance with Rome.
<i>socii Latini</i>	<i>socii</i> of the "Latin status."
Spartiate	"Spartan," but really implying "equal." A citizen of the Spartan city-state who went through the rigorous and intensive warrior training that made the Spartans famous.
<i>speira</i>	a unit of four <i>tetrarchiai</i> , for a rough

speirarchēs/speirarch

total of 256 soldiers. Approximately somewhere between a modern company and battalion.

the officer in charge of a *speira*. Roughly equivalent to a modern lieutenant colonel.

spolia opima

“rich plunder.” The weapons, armor and other treasure stripped from an enemy leader killed in single combat. Once of the highest military honors a Roman could win.

stratēgia

a unit of four *chiliarchiai*, for a total 4,096 soldiers. Roughly equivalent to a modern brigade.

stratēgos

officer in charge of a *stratēgia*. Roughly equivalent to a modern brigadier general.

successors

also known as the *diadochi*, the rival generals who fought over Alexander the Great’s empire, establishing Hellenistic dynasties in their own right. The three best known and longest-lived are the Ptolemies, the Antigonids and the Seleucids.

synaspismos

“locked shields” formation for a Hellenistic phalanx. Requires elevation of the pike to a level impractical for combat, and is therefore entirely defensive.

tesserarius

the watch commander in a Roman legion. Named for the *tessera*, a small tile or block of wood on which watchwords were written.

tetrarchai

“leaders of four.” Officers in charge of a *tetrarchia*. Roughly equivalent to a modern army captain.

tetrarchiai

plural of *tetrarchia*

tetrarchia

a unit composed of four *lochoi* for a total of 64 soldiers. Roughly equivalent to a modern company.

tetrarchēs/tetrarch

singular of *tetrarchai*.

thorax

cuirass.

Thracian helmet

Sometimes known as the Phrygian helmet. An ancient style of bronze

	helmet that usually covered the entire face and neck. The upper face was usually left open for sight and breathing, and the lower face protected by large cheek pieces, sometimes embossed to look like a long beard. The most distinctive element of the helmet was its high peak, inclined forward like a curling wave.
<i>thureophoroi</i>	a body of soldiers bearing the <i>thureos</i> .
<i>thureos</i>	a large oval shield with a strip-boss (as opposed to a bowl) and a reinforcing spine.
<i>triarii</i>	“third rankers.” A class of Roman legionary who deployed in the third line of the <i>triplex acies</i> . Made up of hardened veterans.
tribune	Latin <i>tribunus</i> , Roman officer ranked below a legate, but above a <i>centurio</i> . Roughly equivalent to a modern colonel.
<i>tribunus militum</i>	the leader of a Roman tribe during the regal period.
<i>triplex acies</i>	the three-line battle order of the Roman legion, consisting of three lines of staggered maniples in the <i>quincunx</i> pattern. The first line was the <i>hastati</i> , followed by the second line of the <i>principes</i> , followed by the third line of the <i>triarii</i> .
triumph	A public celebration of a victorious military commander, which included a procession through the streets of Rome. Only granted for the greatest of victories, it was one of the most coveted honors among Rome’s military elite.
<i>umbo</i>	see “boss.”
vanguard	the leading part of a military formation.
<i>velites</i>	“fast movers.” The youngest and poorest class of troops in the Roman army, serving in the role of skirmishers.
Vergina sun	an ancient Greek and Hellenistic heraldic device featuring a 16-rayed sun.
<i>virtus</i>	Roman masculine virtue. Encompassing

courage, military skill, valor, decency and honor.

vitis Latina

Latin vine-rod.

warband

the most common infantry formation among the Celtic peoples of this period. Usually only semi-organized and prizing individual bravery over discipline and keeping ranks.

xiphos

a straight, sometimes leaf-bladed, cut and thrust sword around 1–2 feet long. The standard side arm of the Hellenistic phalangite.

xyston

a two-handed spear around 12 feet long.



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There are many editions of translations of the primary sources. There's a lot of debate surrounding which translation is best, but the bottom line is that you're best served by doing it yourself. Even better, there are more than a few libraries online that provide primary sources in both the original language and in translation for free. My favorite is Tufts University's Perseus Digital Library, which you can find at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>. Perseus accepts donations, and if you've enjoyed this book at all, I'd ask that you please give generously.

I did as much translating as I could with my admittedly weak Latin and Greek, and leaned on a variety of translations to check my work. So, below I'll provide my list of sources, and I'll leave it to you to decide which translation you like best, or whether you'd rather slug it out with the Latin or Greek yourself.

Ancient Sources

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Reenactors and Experimental Archaeologists

A lot of incredible work is being done in this field, and there is an amazing amount that can be gleaned from experimenting with the equipment and tactics that defined the ancient battlefield. I want to acknowledge these groups here as a source. A quick Google search will reveal any number of them, probably not too far from you, but I want to remind you of one project in particular: the Linothorax Project of Professor Gregory S. Aldrete at University of Wisconsin Green Bay. Professor Aldrete's scientific approach to reproducing Hellenistic linen cuirasses using original materials and processes, and then testing them under real battlefield conditions is, in my opinion, one of the best examples of reenactment and experimental archaeology being put to use to illuminate and enrich scholarship in ways that conventional archaeology and examination of the literary sources never will. You can check out the project (and go down a rabbit hole of images, videos and articles) here – <https://www.uwgb.edu/alldreteg/Linothorax.html>. I encourage you to view reenactors as historians tackling history from a different angle, and to push past the nerd stereotypes that have dogged the field for so long. Don't let these keep you from using one of the most effective tools we have for learning about the past.

War games

As with reenactment, war gaming is a critical part of understanding ancient warfare, and I once again want to make sure I call the discipline out as a legitimate and even important means of study for any student of ancient military history. Tabletop games that simulate the military strategy and tactics of ancient war allow students to grasp the interplay of combined arms and troop roles, terrain and leadership, weather, maneuver, line of sight, morale, and almost every factor save the experience of the individual (which is best left to reenactors). The act of painting miniatures will make you aware of the tiniest details in uniforms and equipment (and any miniatures war gamer will tell you that Osprey books are probably the best resource for getting this stuff right!).

War games vary in quality, but I want to mention a few here. GMT Games (gmtgames.com) produces consistently high quality products that combine a real effort at historical accuracy with simplicity and efficient design that allows players to forget the rules, and instead get lost in the experience of planning set piece battles. If you're new to war gaming, I highly suggest you start out with *Commands & Colors: Ancients* as it's a simple way to dip your toe in. I also recommend rule systems like *Hail, Caesar* and *Warhammer Ancients* (no longer made, but you can still find it), though these are considerably more complicated. *De Bellis Antiquitatis* is another great way to dip your toe in, if you can make it past the rule book's utterly impenetrable English. Osprey's Wargames series is a great set of rules spanning almost every period of history on land and sea, and often written by (and in consultation with) the historians that make their other series so important.

Modern Sources

Remember my primary goal here: I want you to fall in love with history. To that end, I will suggest here not only the secondary sources that were useful to me for research purposes, but those I think are compelling reads that will grab your attention and hopefully cultivate a love of the discipline. While I won't cite it here, I want to include historical fiction. It is absolutely possible to write historical fiction grounded in scholarship that can educate, illuminate and most importantly, grab you and suck you in. Please make sure you check out the work of Steven Pressfield (I've already mentioned *The Afghan Campaign*), Mary Renault (*The Last of the Wine* is my favorite) and of course Colleen McCullough (*The First Man in Rome* is her most famous).

My first choice is Osprey's complete line of series books (and no, they are not paying me to say this). The Men-at-Arms and Elite series cover details of military organization and equipment by army. Campaign covers military campaigns in depth. Warrior does a deep-dive on individual warrior kit, deployment and direct experience in battle at a personal level. All of these books are written with

accessibility in mind, and are heavily illustrated to help bring the world of the text to life. Osprey books launched my interest in history, and it has been lifelong. I hope they'll do the same for you. Here's a selection of some of the titles that I referred to for this book (I'll just put the year and the series title, since you already know they're Osprey, Oxford books):

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